

Advanced: Building vocabulary for reading comprehension

Most children need to spend their first couple of years at school focusing on building strong foundations in oral language and phonological awareness to support vocabulary and early reading skills. Once they have strong foundations, the focus can switch to building vocabulary in text. If the children you teach are at this level, I strongly recommend:



Beck, Isabel L, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan. *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*. New York: Guilford Press, 2002.



Two-part presentation on vocabulary instruction by the brilliant Professor Pamela Snow and Emina McLean, a senior researcher at the Australian Education Research Organisation (Aero).

Introduction to vocabulary:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aAsP_my4Do

Building vocabulary for reading comprehension:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfTz3-2Htal>



The information below highlights some of the points made by the wonderful Emina McLean in a blog post which can be found here:

<https://www.eminamclean.com/post/explicit-vocabulary-instruction-across-grades-and-subjects>

Even if you are already well-informed regarding teaching vocabulary and literacy it is well worth reading the whole blog post. Sincere thanks to Emina for all the great work she does to promote evidence-based practice in supporting the development of language, and literacy. The words below are from this blog. I can take no credit for this wisdom.

What do we know about incidental versus direct and explicit approaches to vocabulary instruction?

There is a place for both (e.g., [National Reading Panel](#), 2005, p.25) but:

- A single contact with a word will rarely lead to a student understanding and retaining a word's meaning (Nagy et al, 1987; Beck et al, 2013). Students need multiple exposures in multiple contexts in order to develop rich word knowledge.

- Incidental instruction tends to be equated with contextually appropriate but superficial knowledge (students are able to comprehend it now in context but they probably will not be able to later independently)
- Direct and explicit instruction tends to lead to deeper word knowledge (students are able to comprehend it now and later)
- Lower progress readers derive even less benefit from incidental approaches (Biemiller, 2001)

The question I like to use to prompt us to think more about the what and the how is:

“Through my vocabulary instruction, am I facilitating comprehension in this moment only, or word learning for comprehension now *and* later?”

Adult mediation before, during, or even after reading to clarify a word meaning to facilitate reading comprehension is not the same as vocabulary instruction (word learning). These are two goals to address separately. Intervening to achieve a comprehension goal is about providing clarification in the moment while achieving a word learning goal requires explicit teaching, elaboration, and practice, for the future retrieval and application. One is about performance (information is in my fragile working memory; I have it for now for what I need to do now), and one is about learning (information is in long-term memory; I can access it whenever I want or need to). For more on performance versus learning, I suggest reading a recent paper by [Soderstrom and Bjork](#) (2015).

What is *robust* vocabulary instruction?

“A robust approach to vocabulary involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with **thought-provoking, playful, and interactive follow-up.**”

(Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013, p.3)

Which words to teach and why

Tier 1

These words are common, everyday words (*cat, eat, house*). They are typically naturally acquired, so explicit teaching is not required. There are times when we may need to focus on Tier 1 words, for example if a student is learning English as an Additional Language and has very few Tier 1 words in their lexicon, or if a student has a Language Disorder or [Developmental Language Disorder](#), but this is usually not the focus of whole-class instruction.

Tier 2

These words are general academic words, common in written language (*analyse, precede, auspicious*). They typically require explicit instruction. Why? Students will not just pick them up in everyday spoken language because we do not use them

very much. Without Tier 2 words students will generally struggle to move from using everyday spoken language to becoming a literate language user. A barrier exists between everyday spoken and written (academic/book) language, and academic success tends to be more likely when students cross this so called 'lexical bar' (Corson, 1985;1995).

Additionally, written meaning and context, and the sophisticated vocabulary of written language is far harder to decipher than oral meaning and context due to the absence of verbal and nonverbal cues that we use when speaking, and the words are more abstract and less imageable. Students are therefore less likely to learn word meanings well just through reading them.

Tier 2 words are frequent in text. We have approximately 2000 high frequency words that make up about 80% of what we read in text (Nation, 2001; Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2008). The majority of the remaining 20% are Tier 2 words. We can easily see that it would be quite hard for a student to read accurately and fluently for word, sentence or paragraph meaning if they had to stop to figure out the meaning of every fifth word.

Hayes and Ahrens (1988) compared words present in spoken language and written language. They found in adult conversations there were about 17 rare (or more abstract) words per 1000 words spoken, while there were about 30 rare words in children's books and about 52 in adult books, per 1000 words written. We must teach students the vocabulary of text, and that is precisely the purpose of Tier 2 vocabulary instruction.

Tier 3

These words are specific academic words that belong to a domain or discipline (*epidermis, multiplication, species, isotope*). They are common in domain specific texts and subject specific content and students benefit from explicit instruction.

It is important for students to understand the key terms used in each area of study. This contributes to the development of domain specific background knowledge. Teaching Tier 3 vocabulary is therefore teaching discipline knowledge.

Planning and conducting a lesson

Step 1. Choose the text

I won't focus too much on this aspect in this blogpost. I do suggest curriculum mapping across at least English, Humanities, Mathematics, and Science, in order to develop:

- A Reading Spine (core texts that matter for building reading comprehension and knowledge; the choices need to be intentional and sequential)
- A vocabulary scope and sequence/curriculum (mapping words to units of study/texts)

Some key considerations:

- In primary school, read harder texts/texts that they can't read well themselves
- Read more nonfiction
- Do not transition to independent reading too soon (there is no rush)
- The texts you select, regardless of your subject area, are as important as how you teach them (carefully consider both aspects)
- Don't rely on levelling systems to determine year/grade level texts as they can be inaccurate/misleading
- Expose students to the [five plaques of reading comprehension](#) as outlined by Lemov, Driggs and Woolway (2016)
- Expose students to a range of text forms (reports, articles, poetry etcetera) and genres

Step 2. Choose the words

Choose Tier 2 words from informational and narrative texts:

- with academic and social utility or words that have mileage (they need to be useful)
- that they can conceptually understand
- that they won't come across in everyday spoken language
- that are more abstract (not concrete) with low(er) imageability
- that are more complex and difficult to learn through incidental exposure

How many words? Beck et al (2013) suggest ~2-3 per book in the early years. In the primary years ~5 words per week and in the secondary years ~10 words per week can be quite realistic.

If books in the early years don't offer up good Tier 2 candidates, use the ideas expressed in the book or Tier 1 words to generate Tier 2 words to teach (Beck et al, 2013). For example, if the protagonist was sad, this is a great opportunity to teach a word like 'despondent'. If they were happy, we may choose to teach 'elated'.

For informational texts, in addition to Tier 2 words, choose Tier 3 words that are:

- Domain specific
- Key to understanding the text and/or the topic e.g., integer, coefficient, reactant, precipitant, solubility, anaerobic, genome

Consider using wordlists to help guide you in your word choices when developing a vocabulary scope and sequence for units of study. For example, [The Academic Wordlist](#) (Coxhead, 2000) provides us with 3000 Tier 2 words that occur commonly in texts. Coxhead has sorted these words into a range of helpful groups, like 570

headwords (word families) and 10 frequency lists (from most to least frequently occurring in text).

Step 3. Plan the lesson

Read the text and plan the reading comprehension aspect of the lesson or unit. Prepare student friendly explanations for the words you have chosen following these key steps:

1. Look up the word in a few different dictionaries online or glossaries in informational texts.
2. Consider the definitions from the learner's point of view, based on their age/stage. We are trying to explain the word's meaning rather than giving them the definition. There is a difference.
3. Consider how you would characterise/frame the word so the meaning is clear.
4. Consider everyday language that you can use to create the explanation.
5. Create the student friendly explanation ensuring the meaning is clear and explicit. Scripts can be very useful here.

Step 4. Deliver the lesson

Pre-reading and lesson planning (including vocabulary selection) have already taken place.

Conduct the first part of the lesson:

- Read the text, which can be as a read-aloud, through shared reading or independent reading. Embed bursts of close reading, question generation, and writing.
- Use initial questions (open questions that invite description or explanation about text ideas) and follow up questions (questions designed to scaffold students' thinking and foster development and elaboration of ideas) throughout.
- Students are active participants in teacher-led purposeful discussions about the text ideas afterward.

The components I want to talk about in this post are what comes next:

- 1. Introduce the words and student friendly explanations.
- 2. Solidify meaning as soon as the text has been read.
- 3. Take the words beyond the context of the text.
- 4. Questions, reasons, and examples.

- 5. Get students to make choices about the words.
- 6. Get students to use all of the words.
- 7. Get students to use the words in their writing.

Most of these instructional ideas and lesson components come from the work of Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2013), in their brilliant book, '[Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction](#).' I recommend this book as a starting point to anyone considering the ways in which they can make their vocabulary instruction more explicit and intentional.

Step 4.1: Introduce the words and student friendly explanations.

- There is no need to introduce the word beforehand if you are reading together (i.e., no pre-teaching).
- As an alternative to pre-teaching words that are disruptive to reading comprehension, you can provide a student-friendly explanation in the moment that the word is encountered when reading and move on.
- Once the book has been read and purposeful text discussion has concluded, introduce each word and their student friendly explanations.

We want students to encounter the word first in the context of the text and meaning will be introduced and elaborated upon afterward. There are times you may want to introduce a word before it is read, especially with older readers, in order for it to be semantically available to them when they read. That is, only if you feel it will be disruptive to reading comprehension if they don't know its meaning ahead of time. Words that relate to really key concepts, themes or ideas can and should be taught before reading. It is important that we remember that the purpose of pre-teaching is to ensure those words don't get in the way of reading comprehension during the text.

Pre-teaching is not very often or at all about word learning. It is about facilitating reading comprehension. Word learning requires a lot more effort than pre-teaching.

Pre-teaching can also come with some risks. Elaborated attention to meanings in a range of contexts before the story can distract and/or mislead students. It is usually preferable for students to encounter the new vocabulary in the context of the text. That is, decontextualised word learning BEFORE reading the text, especially for a number of words can lead to the students confusing the meanings of the words (Beck et al, 2013).

So, we are not pre-teaching to teach word meanings, we are pre-teaching to facilitate reading comprehension in the moment.

Step 4.2: Solidify meaning as soon as the text has been read (based on Beck et al, 2013).

Word associations

Once you have provided student friendly explanations, get students to associate the new words with words or phrases you present. Get them to explain their reasoning. They should always be expected to justify their choices. Cold calling works well. E.g., If I had taught 'shuddered', 'hurled' and 'compel', I could ask, "Which word goes with threw?"

Describe a time when you...

Get students to associate the word with a range of contexts from their own experience so they can see it being of personal use, which boosts the chance of them wanting to use it. E.g., If I had taught the word, 'compel', I could ask the students to "Describe a time when you might compel someone."

Which would you rather? When/how/why might you?

Ask a range of questions about the words that have been taught. E.g., If I had taught 'encounter', I could ask the students, "Would you rather encounter a grumpy parent or grumpy sibling?" (again, rationales are essential). This section requires some preparation as well, for examples, synonyms, phrases, and questions.

Step 4.3: Take the words beyond the context of the text.

Provide extended examples of the word meanings in a range of contexts, so the students don't only develop context-bound understandings of the words. E.g., If I had taught the word meaning for 'dazzling' and the context was that in the story, Sylvia had *dazzling* teeth, I would want to make sure I gave other examples that weren't about teeth or necessarily about vivid colours.:

Sunlight

Diamond

Performance of an athlete or debating team member

Art on display

Step 4.4: Questions, reasons, and examples (based on Beck et al, 2013)

I have created a script to help me introduce this activity. "I am going to ask you some questions about the words we have learned. I want you to use reasons or examples in your responses."

E.g., Which of these three things is *impressive*? Tell me why or why not. [list three things]

E.g., Which of these three things is an example of *solubility*? Tell me why or why not. [list three things]

E.g., What is something you could do to *encourage* your peer? Why? What are some of the reasons why we might *encourage* our peers?

E.g., If you are holding a baby, you need to do it *carefully*. Why? What are some other things that you need to do *carefully*?

Step 4.5: Get students to make choices about the words (based on Beck et al, 2013).

Again, I have created a script to help me to introduce this task. “I’m going to say some things. I want you to tell me if they are examples of the word we are focusing on or not. If they are examples of the word, I want you to say that word. If they are not examples, you don’t need to say anything.”

The word is *jubilant*. Say *jubilant* if any of the things I say would mean someone was *jubilant*.

Sitting on a chair
Winning the netball match
Washing the dishes
Becoming school captain
Winning Tattslotto

If you are using [Explicit Direct Instruction](#) or [Teach Like a Champion](#) techniques, you can incorporate full sentence answers here. It is a good expectation to have across the board anyway.

Step 4.6: Get students to use all of the words (based on Beck et al, 2013).

My script: “We have learned three words today. Those words were _____, _____ and _____. I want us to think about them some more now before we finish the lesson.”

- Relating words (ask students to share ways in which the words are/could be related using full sentences)
- Sentences (ask a question using more than one of the target words in the question). E.g., “Would you *prefer* to *disturb* a sleeping dog or *ferocious* wolf? Why?”
- Choices (ask a question using an example and get students to choose between two target words in their answer). E.g., “If you pack your bag the night before school, would that be *sensible* or *complicated*?”

Students create their own examples (ask a question to which they must respond with a detailed explanation/justification). E.g., “If I told you I was feeling *radiant*, what might have happened?” or “Why might someone be walking *cautiously*?”

Step 4.7: Using The Writing Revolution (Hochman & Wexler, 2017)

We know writing about what you have read about improves reading comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2011), so we don't want to forget writing instruction for vocabulary and reading comprehension development.

Here are my four-favourite sentence-level TWR activities, and the ways I infuse vocabulary into them.

1. Sentence stems with *because, but, so*, providing the target vocabulary in the stems:

Emina felt **enraged** because _____
Emina felt **enraged**, but _____
Emina felt **enraged**, so _____

Emina was **perplexed** because _____
Emina was **perplexed**, but _____
Emina was **perplexed**, so _____

The **recession** was **devastating** because _____
The **recession** was **devastating**, but _____
The **recession** was **devastating**, so _____

2. Sentence types, providing a list of words they need to include in their sentence:

Topic: Tropical cyclones

Vocabulary: debris (S), forecasts (Q), catastrophic (E), thoroughly (C)

Statement: _____
Question: _____
Exclamation: _____
Command: _____

S: Tropical cyclones leave debris behind.
Q: Who forecasts tropical cyclones in Australia?
E: Tropical cyclones are catastrophic! Tropical cyclones are thoroughly catastrophic!
C: Prepare thoroughly for this tropical cyclone.

3. Sentence kernels and sentence expansion, with target words provided for 'how':

Kernel: Emina presented.

Vocabulary: enthusiastically, half-heartedly, coldly, speedily

When:
Where:

How:

Expanded sentence: _____

On Friday at 2PM Emina presented enthusiastically on Zoom.

4. Appositives, with a list of taught words, and students must choose one to include in their appositive:

Vocabulary: passionate, driven, ambitious

Read Ballarat, _____, is regional Victoria's most influential literacy community of practice.

a group for educators who are passionate about reading instruction

Thank you to Read Ballarat for letting me try this one out with them!

Step 5. Retrieval practice

Review is essential to stimulating long-term learning and retention of vocabulary (Beck, Perfetti & McKeown, 1982).

Review is often absent or insufficient (Beck & McKeown, 2005) which leads to students knowing the word now (performance) but not later (learning).

In closing

Robust (explicit, extended) vocabulary instruction is a powerful tool for improving reading comprehension, writing, spoken language, and academic achievement more broadly. It is likely to be most effective when embedded across the curriculum in a structured and planned manner.