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Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is a significant predictor of success, both in school and in life. The more words we know, the more likely we are to be able to make sense of what we read and share our thinking with others. Words reflect the concepts and background knowledge we have gained thus far in life. Importantly, our vocabulary continues to grow throughout our lives. While we were writing this book, 370 words were added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Someone can now say that Nancy is *adorkable*, and we know what that means. We also know that *altcoins* are becoming increasingly common, and there are any number of news stories about *cryptocurrency*. Importantly, we don't learn words, we learn concepts. Words are the labels for the concepts we have acquired. We have an image of what *adorkable* means because we've experienced it, and perhaps Nancy exemplifies it, but now we have a label for it.

Yes, our vocabularies continue to grow over our lifetimes. But it's not just that new words are being added to our language on a regular basis. As our experiences grow, so does the terminology that we use to understand and share those experiences. Unlike some of the constrained skills (e.g., phonics and fluency) that have a ceiling effect, meaning that once they are learned there is no additional growth, vocabulary is unconstrained. Our word knowledge grows and expands and doesn't seem to have an upper limit. In other words, vocabulary learning is important from the time we are born throughout the rest of our lives. And vocabulary instruction is worth our time (e.g., Nation, 2021).

It is also interesting to note that missing a single idea (word or phrase) can interfere with our understanding. Before we provide you with examples, we want to comment on the misuse of assessments of vocabulary (and comprehension) to estimate reading proficiency. In 1946, Betts introduced a reading level framework that has remained remarkably entrenched for the last seven decades. He estimated that reading a text independently required that readers recognize words with 99 to 100 percent accuracy and correctly answer comprehension questions with 90 to 100 percent success. Further, he estimated that it would be frustrating for readers when their accuracy dipped below 90 percent, and their ability to answer comprehension questions was less than 50 percent. He theorized that a student's instructional level, then, was the sweet spot between the two: accuracy of 95 to 99 percent and comprehension at 75 to 89 percent. It just turns out that he was wrong. There are numerous studies that show that readers can access complex texts with appropriate scaffolds (e.g., Shanahan, 2019a) and that a single idea can completely interfere with understanding. Here are two examples.

Someya recently turned 18 and was excited to share a letter she received. She was offered a credit card with a \$500 limit. The notes on the bottom of the letter indicated

that she would be charged 23 percent daily compounding interest. Not knowing what those words meant, Someya had agreed to the credit card, spent the \$500, and was shocked to see how much she owed. In this case, the lack of academic vocabulary knowledge put her at risk of being taken advantage of by a financial institution.

And older example comes from Bransford and Johnson (1972), who noted that missing a single idea in a text compromises understanding. In this case, think about what *things* means.

First you arrange things into groups. Of course one pile may be enough, depending on how much there is to do; but some things definitely need to be separated from others. A mistake here can be expensive; it is better to do too few things at once than too many. The procedure does not take long; when it is finished, you arrange the things into different groups again, so that they can be put away where they belong.

Now imagine you know that *things* are laundry. Doesn't that clear up a lot? Your accuracy was likely 100 percent, but the missing concept interfered with your ability to use the information. It is for these reasons that academic vocabulary is one of the deal breakers in learning across content areas.

Having said that, it's important to recognize that readers must decode the words and orthographically map them. We are not trying to minimize foundational reading skills, as they are critical and have been explored elsewhere (e.g., Fisher et al., 2023), but rather highlight the critical role that word learning plays across the grade levels. It's so important that we wanted to develop an entire playbook translating the evidence on teaching and learning vocabulary into actionable and practical ideas.

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We don't have to rely solely on our own experiences. The ideas in this playbook are supported by decades of research. Vocabulary development plays a major role in a student's content knowledge (Hiebert, 2020; Marulis & Neuman, 2010) and has been linked with learning to read as well as reading comprehension (e.g., Beck et al., 2013; Chall et al., 1990; Graves, 2016; Hiebert, 2020; Manyak et al., 2021; Marzano, 2020; Moats, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000; Scarborough, 2001; Stahl, 1983; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). The relationship between academic vocabulary and reading proficiency is so powerful that there is evidence that vocabulary size in kindergarten is an effective predictor of reading comprehension and academic achievement in the later school years (Scarborough, 2001).

Quality Vocabulary Instruction

Sadly, vocabulary instruction in many classrooms is often neglected or occurs in ineffective, or even harmful, ways. To increase the quality of vocabulary instruction requires a sustained focus on vocabulary acquisition. Teachers must teach students *how* to learn new words as well as the meanings of specific words. Integrating the research evidence indicates that students should be taught how to learn words through wide reading, teacher modeling, *and* explicit, systematic, and direct instruction. We have developed an academic vocabulary initiative that consists of five big ideas. Each of the big ideas is further developed in the modules that follow. This approach serves to develop the general, specialized, and technical vocabulary necessary for student success, both inside and outside of school. For now, let's briefly explore each of the big ideas.

1. **Make It Intentional.** First and foremost, teachers must intentionally select words that are worth teaching. We need to carefully consider the types of words students need to know and learn. Students need to understand technical words to

become proficient with the discourse of the discipline. They also need to know the specialized words that are commonly used but that change their meaning based on the context or content area in which they are used. The key here is to determine which words students need to know and how to best teach them. Intentional vocabulary instruction is based on a gradual release of the responsibility learning model, which suggests that teachers should purposefully plan to increase students' responsibility for learning.

Teachers must teach students *how to* learn new words as well as the meanings of specific words.

2. **Make It Transparent.** Once we have selected words to teach, we have to incorporate systematic and explicit direct instruction to support students' academic vocabulary development. We also need to include teacher modeling as part of instruction. Modeling word-solving strategies and word-learning strategies will help students learn words by providing them with cognitive guidance and a how-to model. When teachers read aloud to their students and share their thinking about words in the text, they develop their students' metacognitive skills.
3. **Make It Transferable.** In addition to the intentional selection of vocabulary, another component of our vocabulary approach encourages teachers to focus instruction on high-frequency prefix, suffix, and root words. This study of word parts and their meanings is called *morphology*. In focusing on word parts, students develop the necessary skills to make educated inferences about words they do not know when encountered in a text. This approach also has students study clusters of words that share meanings, which helps students remember them.
4. **Make It Usable.** Being introduced to words and word solving is an important aspect of vocabulary learning, but students have to use the words they've been taught if they are to "own" them. Students simply will not incorporate complex vocabulary into their speaking and writing unless they are provided multiple opportunities to do so. This component is critical if students are to move beyond being passive participants and incorporate new word learning into their knowledge base. Authentic, collaborative tasks that require students to use newly acquired vocabulary verbally and in writing are essential for acquisition of vocabulary knowledge.
5. **Make It Personal.** Independent learning is a vital but often undervalued aspect of word acquisition. The fact is, we all learn words on our own, sometimes through reading and other times through tasks that require us to consolidate understanding. In this strand of our model, students are given tasks that allow them to apply what they have learned in novel situations and build their word consciousness. This allows students to take ownership of the vocabulary by integrating it into their personal verbal and written repertoires.

Despite the evidence that academic vocabulary learning should occur across grades and subjects, in many classrooms word learning is relegated to the language arts curriculum or specifically to English class. Scott et al. (2003) reported that only 1.4 percent of instructional time in the content disciplines (math, science, social studies, and the arts) was devoted to word learning. Decades before, Durkin (1978) found that in the 4,469 minutes of reading instruction that were observed, a mere nineteen minutes were devoted to vocabulary instruction, and virtually no vocabulary development instruction took place during content instruction such as social studies. A major purpose of this book is to help you change this statistic in your classroom.

And so, we set out to identify effective practices. We tried them out for ourselves, in our own classrooms as well as in the classrooms of our friends and colleagues, to determine how students could be engaged with academic vocabulary learning. In addition, we have tracked the implementation of these approaches using both quantitative and qualitative measures to ensure that they are effective (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2007a, 2021), so we would feel comfortable making specific recommendations.

With this playbook, our goal is to show you a teaching and learning framework that helps students become self-regulating, independent word learners. We want to move your thinking from the view of vocabulary instruction as disembodied lists of words for students to memorize toward a stance where word learning is fun for students, is an excuse to interact with peers, and gives students the intellectual and social currency to be able to think, speak, read, and write with greater facility.

The Big Picture

Without question, vocabulary knowledge is critical. Knowledge of, and about, words not only serves as an excellent predictor of students' achievement but is inexorably linked to overall reading comprehension and academic achievement. Teachers witness each day the struggle some of their students face as they labor through text that uses unfamiliar words. However, the enormous vocabulary demand on students makes it impossible to provide direct instruction on each and every unfamiliar word they encounter. In order to do so, you would need to suspend any other teaching, and in the end it wouldn't be effective anyway, because students wouldn't be getting the experiences they'd need to make word learning meaningful. Instead, students need a combination of approaches that together foster vocabulary acquisition and lead to more sophisticated language usage. The remainder of this playbook describes the components of a *deliberate* approach for vocabulary development. With this approach, students become increasingly proficient readers, writers, and thinkers about the biological, physical, artistic, social, and literary world around them. In other words, the focus on academic vocabulary ensures their entrance into the wide world of knowledge.

To get ready for what's to come in the rest of this playbook, here is an anticipation guide to help you evaluate your current level of understanding.

I know the difference between types of words and can articulate it clearly.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel confident in selecting vocabulary words to teach to my students.	1	2	3	4	5
I can articulate the difference between incidental and explicit word learning.	1	2	3	4	5
I have a process that I already use for direct instruction of words.	1	2	3	4	5
I regularly teach using modeling to support my students' vocabulary development and word-solving strategies.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand what morphology is and why it is a valuable word-solving strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel confident in using strategies for peer discussion and collaboration to develop students' vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5
I have strategies that I use with my students to build them into independent word learners.	1	2	3	4	5
I can articulate the importance of word consciousness, and I regularly use strategies to promote it among my students.	1	2	3	4	5
My students regularly engage in reading in my classroom and at home.	1	2	3	4	5