WHEN OLD BECOMES NEW

Bringing vocabulary instruction back into our schools.

By Aradhana Mudambi
Until recently, direct vocabulary instruction in the classroom was a relic similar to dinosaur bones and record players. Research told us that the best way for children to increase their vocabulary was to read widely, so as educators, we pushed our students to borrow more books from the library. We insisted that every child read for 30 minutes at home every day. Programs such as Drop Everything and Read, commonly known as DEAR time, infiltrated our schools. Now, many moons later, we are beginning to realize how misguided we were.

The Meaning of Words
Reading widely will not help children with weak vocabulary bases improve their vocabulary skills. This is the crux of the Matthew Effect, described by Keith Stanovich in the *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*. The Matthew Effect—named after a biblical declaration that the more you have, the more will be given to you—states that reading will help students improve their vocabulary only if they already have strong reading comprehension skills, and that students can develop strong reading comprehension skills only if they already have a large vocabulary base. Since most students do not have large vocabularies, this circular relationship highlights the importance of teaching words directly.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—and other state curricula that emphasize college- and career-readiness—increase the urgent need to improve direct vocabulary instruction. For the first time, our standards demand high levels of achievement. They emphasize college- and career-readiness—increase the urgent need to improve direct vocabulary instruction. For the first time, our standards demand high levels of achievement. They emphasize students’ need to be able to sift through words’ multiple meanings. For instance, students are asked not only to know the multiple definitions of one word, but also to be able to recognize which meaning is correct within the context of a passage. They also have to be able to compare and contrast different usages of the same word within the same text.

Strategies
To address these needs, principals should build a school culture where vocabulary instruction is a deliberate part of literacy development. However, there will likely be two major roadblocks in such an effort. First, principals must convince faculty members of the importance of direct vocabulary instruction. Second, vocabulary instruction will compete with other instructional goals.

After decades of telling our educators that wide reading can replace the actual teaching of words, many teachers might not support a school-wide vocabulary program and favor more reading instead. In response, explain to teachers how the Matthew Effect proves that our previous maxims were wrong.

Also, for some teachers, with the increasing demands that new standards place on the sacred commodity of classroom time, vocabulary will take a back seat to the many other reading comprehension goals that can more easily be accomplished.

Teaching vocabulary is complicated, and in an environment where vocabulary instruction is only now coming back into the mainstream classroom, it requires a lot of preparation on the part of teachers.

A strategy to underscore the value of improving students’ vocabulary is giving teachers a piece of foreign text to read. No matter how many reading comprehension strategies they know, without the vocabulary in the foreign language, teachers will still have trouble reading it. For many of our students, this is what grade-level English resembles—a foreign language. Teachers also should understand that, as demonstrated by the Matthew Effect, the greater the student’s vocabulary base, the faster his or her reading comprehension skills can develop, thus saving educators time in the long run.

Because vocabulary instruction has for so long been eclipsed by an emphasis on wide reading, most teachers have not been trained in teaching vocabulary. Therefore, most classrooms that do include some level of vocabulary instruction have students merely memorize definitions of words found in basal readers and, perhaps, write a sentence with each word. Some progressive classrooms may have
a word wall. These minimal tactics neither result in long-term vocabulary gain, nor do they teach vocabulary at a level expected by Common Core State Standards and other state curricula.

By depending merely on basal readers to provide vocabulary words, the school may not cover a large percentage of Tier II vocabulary for the grade level. Tier II vocabulary words, such as *intense* and *terrain*, are those words that are high frequency in written but not spoken English. These words are tested on standardized exams throughout the country. (Tier I words are those that appear frequently in spoken English such as *baby* and *talk*. They do not need to be taught.) A survey of exams such as PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and STARR, among others, can help educators create a list of Tier II words. Many organizations also provide a collection of vocabulary words. Compiling your own list of vocabulary words will require substantial initial work and, therefore, time. However, the product you create can be reused in subsequent years, and the results will speak for themselves.

In addition to addressing these concerns, principals should lead teachers in learning how to develop a complete vocabulary program—one that teaches a predetermined set of words by capitalizing on the following four components of effective, vocabulary instruction: word connection, significance, context clues, and a word-rich environment.

1. **Word Connection**
   Students must be able to relate new vocabulary words to other words, images, or ideas. This component is based on Bruner’s theory of constructivism, which states that students learn by connecting the new to what they already know. Strategies include creating semantic webs, graphic organizers, learning synonyms, and labeling pictures.

   In a study that I completed as part of my doctoral dissertation at Harvard University, students unanimously identified assignments that related words to other words as more helpful than all other vocabulary-building activities.

   **Action:** Identify a theme each week or month for schoolwide vocabulary words. For example, one month the theme could be emotion. Give two or more grade-appropriate words each day. For example, you may give sixth graders *gloomy* and *despondent*, and second graders *content* and *unhappy*. Set up in the hallway an interactive bulletin board for each grade level that is designed as a chart or other graphic organizer. The chart should have thematic columns such as happy, sad, angry, etc. Teachers, at set times, bring their students to the interactive bulletin boards where, as a class, the students can take the words out of a container and affix them to the chart. Before leaving, the teacher undoes the chart for the next class. After a couple of months, encourage each teacher to create his or her own interactive vocabulary centers around the classroom.

2. **Significance**
   Significance refers to making user-friendly definitions available to students. According to William Nagy and Judith Scott in their chapter in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (2004), while dictionary definitions often use obscure words, definitions that use more common words that students can understand improve knowledge. For instance, defining *trite* as *banal* would be obscure to a middle school student who likely is unfamiliar with the word *banal*. Instead, the word *overused* would be a more comprehensible definition. Also, as recommended by Camille Blachowicz and Peter Fisher in “Best Practices in Vocabulary Instruction” (2006), definitions, however user-friendly, should always be accompanied by additional learning modalities such as graphic organizers and narratives. These create a greater understanding of the word.

   **Action:** Make warm-up time a chance to model this component. Provide teachers a morning activity
that includes user-friendly definitions for the two words of the day. Give students short passages using these and previously taught vocabulary words. Especially for multiple-definition words, have students identify which of the meanings pertain to the words used in the passage. If the words of the day do not have multiple definitions, ask other questions that force the students to understand the definition. Have classes submit their answers. The first class in each grade level to provide the correct answer wins. Go over the answers quickly during morning announcements, and announce the winning classes.

3. Context Clues

Context clues, as most educators know, refers to the text around a word that helps students decipher the word’s meaning. However, a single exposure to each word is insufficient. Multiple opportunities to encounter context clues within authentic situations that are enhanced with explicit instruction, practice, and feedback, have been shown to aid learning.

For example, consider the following sentence: “The boy, having a high fever, collapsed in the hallway and ended up with a concussion.” Although the sentence uses context clues, so students can figure out the meaning of collapse from the surrounding words, it is a contrived sentence without a narrative or extended text in which to fit. On the other hand, consider if the word was presented in the same sentence, as part of a two-page story about a boy who had spent months preparing for being in a musical but woke up ill. The more authentic situation in which the sentence is presented would improve long-term memory of the word. Additional vocabulary words being included in the text would bolster the learning of the word even more since it would connect collapse to other vocabulary words. This is an example of combining the instructional component (word connection) with the use of context clues.

Action: Prepare short narratives that include at least 10 vocabulary words, and formulate questions that address the vocabulary words. Good questions include those that ask students to differentiate among multiple meanings or that ask students to identify context clues that point to the meaning of the words. Have your teachers read these narratives aloud to classes and guide the students through the questions. You may want to model this procedure for your teachers during staff development.

4. Word-Rich Environment

A word-rich environment surrounds students with words and literature, and challenges their language development. As reinforced by the results of my dissertation study, and by Nagy and Scott’s research published in *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, word-rich environment also refers to the importance of repeatedly presenting a word in different contexts. According to the students who participated in my study, one of the most beneficial elements of the program was the repetition of the words. Words should be presented at least six times, preferably more.

Action: Build a word wall in the cafeteria where all grade levels’ words that have already been taught are displayed. Join students during their lunches and randomly ask them to give you the definitions of the words or to use the words in sentences. Encourage teachers to build their own word walls in their classrooms. Have teachers also ask students to randomly use the words in sentences. Teachers can also have their students work together to make up stories using the words.

While it may not be easy for instructional leaders to reintroduce vocabulary instruction in our schools, by incorporating these four components of a complete vocabulary program into the school’s instructional program, both teachers and students will be amazed to see how reading comprehension scores soar.

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