

Vocabulary Instruction in the Early Grades

Pearl Dean Garden, EdD
Region 10 Education Service Center

Abstract

Some children come to school with a smaller vocabulary than their peers. If children do not have knowledge of the meaning of the words they read in texts, they will fail to comprehend those texts and struggle to keep up with their peers. This is critical because the link between vocabulary and comprehension is very clear (Sticht et al., 1974, as cited in Vadasy & Nelson, 2012). If teachers do not intervene when students are in the early grades, we see that those children who know more words learn additional words more quickly, and subsequently, other children could continue to struggle with reading (Stanovich, 1986). Consequently, some children struggle with reading even more when they enter the upper elementary grades where they can fall into what is referred to as the “fourth-grade slump” when children are beginning to encounter words and word meanings that are increasingly challenging (Chall et al., 1990, p. 1). The author discusses the importance of teaching vocabulary and what vocabulary instruction can look like in the early grades to combat this challenge.

Keywords: *vocabulary instruction, early grade teachers, vocabulary strategies*

It is important to understand how to effectively teach vocabulary, especially in the early grades because according to Hiebert, Goodwin, and Cervetti (2017), when children’s vocabularies are smaller when they start school, their prospects for reading successes may depend on the depth of those school experiences. These children depend on educators to help bridge the gaps in word knowledge. Educators face a daunting chore in providing rich vocabulary instruction to all students (Hiebert et al., 2017) and must consider that in the early grades (kindergarten through third grade), students have more to learn because they also must learn all basic literacy skills. The purpose of this paper is

to emphasize the importance of teaching vocabulary in the early grades by naming vocabulary as a foundational skill as well as by sharing practical information for early grade teachers to teach vocabulary.

Why Teach Vocabulary in the Early Grades?

Foundational Literacy Skills Include Vocabulary

By the end of third grade, students are supposed to have been exposed to all foundational literacy skills necessary to read grade-level text, and if they do not have those skills, they are at risk of

failure (Snow & Matthews, 2016). The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards (2019, p.13), as specified by grade level, task students with practicing these foundational skills by second grade without adult assistance for the first time with texts that are grade level specific. Snow and Matthews found that teachers of students in kindergarten, first, second, and third grade focus on helping children learn the basic principles of mapping sound to print and mapping print to sound. Teachers spending time only on word recognition and phonics could cause a problem because research shows that even children who are fluent at decoding still struggle with comprehension if they do not know the meanings of the words in the text they are reading (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Wright & Neuman, 2014). This section discussed vocabulary instruction as a foundational skill. The next section discusses the importance of vocabulary instruction.

The Importance of Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary instruction is important in the development of children’s reading comprehension. Early vocabulary knowledge predicts children’s reading achievement later in school (Silverman & Crandell, 2010). Rasinski (2019) notes that vocabulary knowledge is necessary; without it, we cannot truly know a text’s meaning. Even though vocabulary and comprehension are closely related, there is evidence that school has a limited impact on children’s vocabulary development (Christian et al., 2000; Wright & Cervetti, 2016). More recently, however, research documents and literacy standards have sought to change the limited impact of vocabulary instruction in classrooms by reinforcing the importance of vocabulary instruction and recommending explicit instruction of vocabulary words as well as vocabulary learning strategies for determining the meaning of unknown words students encounter in the texts they read. As Wright and Cervetti (2016) explain, “the goal of vocabulary instruction is not only knowledge of

a word’s meaning but also easy access of the word’s meaning in memory” (p. 204). It is also important to understand that an explanation of what vocabulary is should include a mention of student’s level of understanding, more specifically breadth, or the size of their mental lexicon, depth, or the robustness of their word knowledge, and fluency, or the rate that they can gain access to word meanings (Hennessy, 2021). In fact, there is research to suggest that depth of vocabulary knowledge helps with reading comprehension starting in the early grades and grows more important as students encounter increasingly challenging texts (Vadasy & Nelson, 2012), further demonstrating the importance of vocabulary instruction.

Vocabulary Instruction in the Early Grades

Research shows that early grade teachers can support children’s vocabulary learning in their classrooms to help prevent later reading difficulties (Sparapani et al., 2018). There is not much research conducted concerning how early childhood teachers learn to support their students’ vocabulary learning, nor is there an adequate amount of research about vocabulary instruction in the early-grade classroom (Harriell et al., 2011). Astoundingly, there is clear evidence that when vocabulary is taught to young children, they learn vocabulary no matter their background (Marulis & Neuman, 2010, 2013). It is also clear that both exposure and word teaching are effective in vocabulary instruction (Wright & Neuman, 2014). Even though the effects of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension are more direct in the upper grades, it is important to keep in mind that this relationship is evident in early reading development as well (Tabors et al., 2001; Vadasy & Nelson, 2012). There is research on language and vocabulary development in the early grades that implies literacy skill, including phonological awareness and vocabulary are connected and change roles over time in literacy skills development, making a case for early language experiences in vocabulary instruction

(Vadasy & Nelson, 2012 p. 2-3). The standard in the Texas Essential Knowledge and skills states that children should be able to:

- use print and digital resources,
- use context to determine the meanings of words,
- use and explain figurative language, and
- identify the meaning of affixes expressively by second grade (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, 2019, p.13).

Children also need opportunities for both direct and indirect instruction along a continuum because of the vast number of words they will possibly be exposed to each year (Graves, 2009; Hennessey, 2021, p. 62). Christ and Wang (2010) say that there are four ways that teachers can help with young children's vocabulary learning. Teachers can provide meaningful exposures, teach words intentionally, teach word learning strategies, and create opportunities to use new words. To continue the discussion of vocabulary, it is important to connect theory to vocabulary instruction and explain how children learn to read, thus giving educators another glimpse at how to teach vocabulary.

Connecting Theory to Vocabulary Instruction

Effective vocabulary instruction presents definitional and contextual information; it provides encounters with words in multiple ways and engages students in the active processing of word meaning (McKeown, 2019). We can more effectively teach vocabulary if we understand how children learn to read. Learning to read words and understand the meanings of those words is a major challenge for early readers, yet both are needed in comprehension (2019). It has been noted in this research that some early grade teachers focus more on foundational literacy skills with minimal attention for vocabulary instruction. It is important to restate the fact that vocabulary

knowledge is a foundational skill because it supports the development of critical reading skills like phonological awareness which is a precondition for decoding skills (Vadasy & Nelson, 2012). The first theory is Ehri's Phases of Word Learning.

Phases of Learning to Read

Ehri (2005) suggested that reading development is a progression towards automaticity in word reading, meaning that when words are known well enough readers can recognize their meaning and pronunciation automatically without attention or effort at sounding out letters. This automaticity ultimately frees a child's attention to focus on the meaning of the words in the texts they were reading. Studies conducted in the early 2000s show that alphabet knowledge enhances the learning of new vocabulary words. The four phases of development of sight word knowledge-are important because once the alphabetic mapping structure is known, a reader can build the meaning of sight words, or words children know with automaticity with repeated encounters (Ehri, 2005). Ehri made the concept of alphabetic processing pivotal to the definition of all four phases (Beech, 2005). These phases are:

- Pre-alphabetic Phase: Non-readers rely on environmental print.
- Partial Alphabetic: Children are learning letters and letter sounds.
- Full Alphabetic phase: Children are forming complete connections between those letters and sounds.
- Consolidated Alphabetic Phase: Students are increasing their sight word memory of words.

Models of Skilled Reading

Skilled reading as explained in the simple view of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) is a formula made of two basic parts. Language comprehension is the ability to get meaning from spoken words when they are in sentences

or they are a part of oral communication, and word recognition is decoding to the fluent recall of words. Making use of the relationship between letters and sounds to identify unknown words is the basis for acquiring word specific knowledge, which includes the knowledge of irregular words (Ehri, 2005; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012; Tunmer & Nicholson, 2011). It is also important to mention that according to Tunmer and Chapman (2012), vocabulary knowledge contributes to the development of both decoding skills and word recognition.

Scarborough's Reading Rope explains that skilled reading is like strands of rope that are woven together during the course of a child becoming a skilled reader (Scarborough, 2001). The critical strands for language comprehension are background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. Each becomes increasingly strategic as a student's skill level increases. The other critical strand—word recognition—is made up of phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition of familiar words (Scarborough, 2001). These get increasingly fluent as a student's skill level increases as Ehri explained in her phases of word reading. The strands of both language comprehension and word recognition began as single strands that were woven together with the result of skilled reading. These skills, sharpened during instruction and experience, develop interactively and not independently (2001).

Using these theories, we can understand that vocabulary instruction in the early grade classroom begins with developing oral language; in fact, there is research to support the idea that oral vocabulary knowledge influences the development of word recognition skills (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012). It starts with phonological awareness, beginning with oral language. During this time, educators can build students' word knowledge through conversations both teacher to student and student to student, by reading aloud books with rich and new words the

children may not be familiar with and by modeling the use of language of the standards. For example, the word horizontal can be used instead of or interchanged with "hot dog" when referring to how to fold a paper in a kindergarten or first grade classroom. In truth, children are exposed to more unique and rich words when being read to than they are through the conversations we have with them (Dobbertin, 2015). Exposing children to a breadth of vocabulary knowledge during Ehri's (2005) full alphabetic phase of word learning can increase the possibility of closing gaps in word knowledge with which some of our children may come to school. There is research to support the idea that exposing second and fifth graders to the spellings of new vocabulary enhances their memory for pronunciations and meanings of those words (Ehri, 2007). As students are learning words, teachers can pronounce, and explain new words to students while showing them how the words are spelled to strengthen vocabulary instruction (2007). Teachers can model how students can use context to understand the meaning of new words as well as other word learning strategies. There is no single theory that has been identified that captures reading progress because the complex nature of learning to read is dependent on several components and there are very few learning or reading theories that explicitly address vocabulary development and instruction (Moody et al., 2018). The theories used in this paper were used to show the importance of vocabulary instruction and make the case for vocabulary development as a foundational literacy skill. Vocabulary instruction and vocabulary instructional strategies will be discussed next.

Vocabulary Instruction and Vocabulary Instructional Strategies

Children need a continuum of direct and indirect opportunities for learning because of the vast amount of new words they eventually will encounter each year. Graves (2009) as cited by Hennessy (2021, p.62) has created a four-part

structured approach that targets both acquisition and application of vocabulary knowledge as well as both direct and indirect opportunities for word learning. This approach includes:

- providing rich and varied language experiences
- teaching individual words
- teaching word learning strategies
- fostering word consciousness

This paper will continue with indirect vocabulary instruction, direct vocabulary instruction, and vocabulary instructional strategies.

Indirect Vocabulary Instruction

As students are reading, writing, listening, and speaking, they are learning words and building their vocabulary. Children come to school with varying amounts of words in their lexicon and in the primary grades, most words are learned incidentally, as children are reading, listening, engaging in conversations in the classroom and writing as mentioned above (Graves, 2006, p. 38). Students in the early grades do not learn many words from the reading they do in school because the books that are in classrooms are made up of words that were already in their oral vocabularies, which make good sense when in the learning to read stage (2006). Independent reading in an early grade classroom does more to reinforce early reading skills and words in their oral vocabularies. In fact, Solity and Vouden (2009) as cited by Castle et al. (2018) analyzed the vocabulary found in books in year 1 and 2 classrooms with students ages 5 to 7. The books in the classroom consisted of high frequency words, phonically regular words, and a set of story books typical for that age group. They found that the books could be decoded by students who knew about 64 grapheme-phoneme correspondences and about 75% of the words were one syllable words. The issue is that word choice in those books is likely to be restricted and inferior to real books.

Wide reading becomes a bigger source of vocabulary development once children can read independently (Hennessy, 2021). It is important to note that indirect vocabulary instruction happens in three ways: through daily oral language, independent reading, and by listening to reading. Effective read-aloud opportunities required intentional text selection and teacher moves that model literacy strategies with think-aloud and engaging student participation (Slay & Morton, 2020). For our young students, the read-aloud is a natural and developmentally suitable way to expand their vocabulary. Students hear new words that are supported in context by illustrations and text that help carry meaning. The teacher is modeling how they use images and text to understand what the unfamiliar words might mean as they are reading. Trelease (2013) noted that one of the most important activities teachers do to build the knowledge necessary for success in reading is reading aloud to children. Reading with children and sharing the joy and love for reading helps children learn that joy and love of reading for themselves (Burkins & Yaris, 2016, p. 30).

Direct Vocabulary Instruction

Students cannot learn through indirect teaching all the words they need to know to access grade-level text and to comprehend enough to make meaning (Beck et al., 2013). It is important to teach some words directly. Direct vocabulary instruction is explicitly teaching word meaning and word learning strategies. Beck et al. (2013) estimate that students are taught about 400 words in an academic year for students in kindergarten through 9th grade. When thinking of direct instruction, then comes the thought of which words to teach. Remembering that some words are learned incidentally through informal everyday interactions, we consider words that students need to know to follow the meaning of stories read aloud or of subjects being learned. Beck et al., (1987) developed the concept of three “word tiers.” They are:

1. Tier One: basic, everyday words

2. Tier Two: words that were high use by mature language users
3. Tier Three: words that were academic and content specific: low frequency.

Next, teachers decide when and how to teach the words they choose. Some words are pre-taught, and others are taught after a lesson. To decide when, some researchers say that teachers should focus on which words need to be clarified for students so that understanding them does not get in the way of their comprehension of the text being read aloud or text they are reading independently. When teaching vocabulary after reading, the focus is on teaching words to add to students' vocabularies, then you teach them in context and/or after reading.

Vocabulary Instruction Strategies

Early grade students in Texas are charged to learn how to use print and digital resources, use context within and beyond a sentence, and identify affixes, synonyms, and antonyms to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, 2019, p.13). Students also are expected to use newly acquired vocabulary expressively in their "reading, writing, listening, and speaking" (2019). As stated above, Graves (2009), as cited by Hennessy (2021), discussed a systematic approach for vocabulary acquisition and application. The final portion of this text will focus on teaching word learning strategies. We will focus on using the dictionary, using context clues, and using morphemic analysis, so we will address morphology, the study of word parts to focus on morphemic analysis.

Using Morphemic Analysis

When students grapple with an unknown word, they can use their knowledge of morphology or word parts. By second grade, students in Texas would learn the affixes -un, -re, -ly, -er, -est, -ion, -tion, and -sion (TEKS, 2019, p. 3). These are called morphemes or meaningful word parts

that are prefixes (coming before a root or base word) or suffixes (coming at the end of a root or base word). Teaching the meanings of these affixes helps students recognize these meaningful word parts in unfamiliar words they encountered in their reading of text. Nagy and Scott (2000) said that students who were struggling readers might benefit from explicit morphological awareness as early as second grade. It was recommended that affixes that were taught at a specific grade level be word parts and then added to a base or root word.

Using a Dictionary

In Texas, students are supposed to use "print and digital" resources to find the meaning and pronunciation of unknown words (TEKS, 2019, p. 3). Different types of dictionaries are most useful when children understand when and how to use them (Hennessy, 2021). Students must learn alphabetical order, use of guide words, symbols, abbreviations, and overall format structures if teachers are introducing them to traditional print books, but using dictionaries tailored to children will help at risk students make sense of dictionary definitions (2021).

Using Context Clues

Researchers believe that even a small improvement in children's ability to use context clues has the potential to produce long-term growth (Hennessy, 2021). It is important that students are taught why, when, and how to use context, what kinds of clues are helpful, and to look for clues (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2009; Hennessy, 2021). The types to consider are listed here:

- definition
- synonyms
- antonyms
- examples
- general

We understand teaching children word learning strategies is very important, and we as educators should tailor our instruction to help students use those strategies to understand word meanings independently (Graves, 2006).

Conclusion

Vocabulary is a foundational skill that is a necessary part of skilled reading. Teaching vocabulary should be a part of foundational

literacy instruction. Research shows that early grades are the best time to develop vocabulary because of brain growth during that time. Intentionally teaching vocabulary by focusing on academic vocabulary, using technology, directly teaching several words, repeating those words, and training teachers about the importance of teaching in the early grades will help ameliorate the gaps in word knowledge that some students may bring to school.

References

- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. (2nd ed). Guilford Press.
- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Omanson, R. C. (1987). The effects and uses of diverse vocabulary instructional techniques. In M. G. McKeown & M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 147–163). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Burkins, J. M., & Yaris, K. (2016). *Who's doing the work?: How to say less so readers can do more*. Stenhouse Publishers.
- Chall, J. S., & Jacobs, V. A. (2003). Poor children's fourth-grade slump. *American Educator*, 27(1), 14–15.
- Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V. A., & Baldwin, L. E. (1990). *The reading crisis: Why poor children fall behind*. Harvard University Press.
- Christian, K., Morrison, F. J., Frazier, J. A., & Massetti, G. (2000). Specificity in the nature and timing of cognitive growth in kindergarten and first grade. *Journal of Cognition and Development*, 1(4), 429–448. doi:10.1207/S15327647JCD0104_04.
- Dobbertin, A. (2015). *City school, urban reform: Sublimating education into daily civic life* (Bachelor of Architecture senior thesis). Retrieved from https://surface.syr.edu/architecture_theses/275
- Ehri, L. C. (2005). Development of sight word reading: Phases and findings. In M. J. Snowling, Editor, & C. Hulme, Editor (Eds.), *The science of reading: A handbook* (pp. 135–154). Blackwell Publishing.
- Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 7, 6–10.
- Graves, M. (2006). *The vocabulary book: Learning & instruction*. Teachers College.
- Hennessy, N. (2021). *The reading comprehension blueprint: Helping students make meaning from text*. Brookes Publishing.
- Hiebert, E. M., Goodwin, A. P., & Cervetti, G. N. (2017). Core vocabulary: Its morphological content and presence in exemplar texts. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 53(1), 29–49.
- Marulis, L. M., & Neuman, S. B. (2010). The effects of vocabulary intervention on young children's word learning: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(3), 300–335. doi:10.3102/0034654310377087
- McKeown, M. G. (2019). Effective vocabulary instruction fosters knowing words, using words, and

- understanding how words work. *Language Speech and Hearing Services in Schools* 50(4), 466–476.
- Nagy, W., and Scott, J. (2000). Vocabulary Processes. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr. *Handbook of Reading Research*, vol. 3, ch. 18. ERIC no. ED451473.
- 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: Reports of the subgroups*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>
- Rasinski, T. (2019, December 3). Why vocabulary still matters. ASCD SmartBrief Newsletter.
- Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. B. Neuman, & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (pp. 97–110). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Silverman, R., & Crandell, J. D. (2010). Vocabulary practices in prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45(3), 318340.
- Silverman, R., & Hines, S. (2009). The effects of multimedia enhanced instruction on the vocabulary of English learners and non-English learners. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(2), 305–314. doi:10.1037/a0014217
- Snow, C. E., & Matthews, T. J. (2016). Reading and language in the early grades. *The Future of Children*, 26(2), 57–74.
- Slay, L. E. & Morton, T. B. (2020). Engaging pre-service teachers in read alouds. *Changing English*, 27(1), 6482. doi: 10.1080/1358684X.2019.1710696
- Stanovich, K. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21(4), 360–407.
- Tabors, P. O., Roach, K. A., & Snow, C. E. (2001). Home language and literacy environment: Final results. In D. K. Dickinson & P. O. Tabors (Eds.), *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school* (pp. 111–138). Brookes Publishing.
- Trelease, J. (2013). *The read-aloud handbook*. Penguin.
- Vadasy, P. F., & Nelson, R. (2012). *Vocabulary instruction for struggling students*. Guilford Press.
- Wexler, N. (2019). *The knowledge gap: The hidden cause of America's broken education system-and how to fix it*. Penguin Random House.
- Wright, T. S., & Cervetti, G. N. (2016). A systematic review of research on vocabulary instruction that impacts text comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 52(2), 203–226. doi: 10.1002/trq.163