Vocabulary Instruction

 Through the use of a few simple routines, you can teach scores of vocabulary words over time and actually have the words stick in the minds of your students to the point where they can use the words in writing and speaking long after they were introduced. To supercharge your vocabulary instruction, you don't need to make major changes to your program or schedule. The biggest change involves how you instruct your large group.

The Importance of Vocabulary Instruction

To be successful in school, students must know the meanings of many words. More specifically, vocabulary knowledge is crucial if a child (or adult) is going to comprehend the meaning of any given word, sentence, paragraph, or story (Nation, 2008). Also, reading comprehension improves when vocabulary instruction is present (Adlof, Perfetti, & Catts, 2011; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). Thus, vocabulary acquisition is a crucial component of learning to read, and teachers must teach word meanings if they want to improve their students' comprehension.

Vocabulary acquisition is especially important for at-risk students. Why? When compared with the general school population, at-risk students are less likely to hear a wide variety of words used in their homes and are more likely to have smaller vocabularies and read fewer words in context (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). In addition, Stahl and Shiel (1992/1999) have said that 300–400 word meanings can be taught with direct instruction during a typical school year. Therefore, if you're teaching at-risk students, the 300–400 words you teach will be a significant portion of the total number of words these students will learn that year.

In addition to direct teaching, vocabulary acquisition occurs naturally as students actively process the words they hear (listening), say (speaking), and see (reading). In reading, most vocabulary is gained during periods of extended reading in connected text (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). Typically this interaction with vocabulary words occurs

during independent and guided reading time. Really, having children read for extended periods of time in a wide variety of text is the number one way of increasing vocabulary.

Teaching Chops: How to Teach Vocabulary

Teacher's manuals often introduce story vocabulary with a routine that goes something like this:

• Hold up a preprinted vocabulary word card.

• Read the manual's definition of the word.

• Read the manual's "word in a sentence" example.

• Ask the manual's question, something like, "What is the opposite of ___?" or "What does ___ mean in this sentence?"

This routine is an ineffective way of introducing vocabulary. Another routine that's even more ineffective looks and sounds something like this:

• Hold up a vocabulary word card.

• Use the word in a sentence.

• Ask the kids, "What does ___ mean?"

Pointing out the words as they arise in the story and then assigningtwo "fill in the blank" vocabulary worksheets are also less than effective routines. To strengthen vocabulary instruction, let's get rid of ineffective routines and add an effective teaching chop: direct and explicit instruction, which is both an instructional technique and a routine. It's also the instructional underpinning of reading programs such as SRA's Corrective Reading. In Corrective Reading, direct instruction is one of a number of instructional techniques woven into each scripted lesson. When you open a Corrective Reading teacher's

manual, all you have to do is read the script for 45–60 minutes, week after week, month after month. I must admit that when I first learned about this repetitive and mechanical form of instruction, I would have preferred to stick a forkin my thigh than to teach this way. However, the tight instructional design of Corrective Reading leads to a high degree of student success, especially for struggling readers. Why? Components of the program, such as brisk pacing, instant error correction, and the aforementioned direct instruction, are highly effective teaching techniques in and of themselves. When combined, they work synergistically to produce a powerful effect.

Now I'm not advocating, or even talking about, using a direct instruction program like Corrective Reading. I'm simply focusing on instruction that directly and explicitly teaches students what they need to learn.

In direct and explicit instruction, there's no student exploration, not much transactional construction, and certainly no guessing involved. You tell the students what they're learning, and you do it directly and explicitly. In its pure form, direct instruction is easy to use, time efficient, and highly effective in getting kids to initially learn basic information. It's a perfect routine for teaching vocabulary words. Perhaps the best way to describe direct instruction is to give you a nonexample first.

Let's say a teacher is planning to teach the meaning of the vocabulary words *enrage* and *tyranny*. Using an anthology story, she draws attention to a sentence and then reads it aloud to the class: "The tax plan enraged the colonists and united them against British tyranny." In nondirect instruction, this teacher might hold up a card with one of the words onit and launch into an instructional technique that I call Can You Guess What I'm Thinking? The student–teacher exchange might sound like this:

Teacher: Who knows what the word *tyranny* means? [Four students raise their hands, and the other 19 sit quietly.] Tywan?

Tywan: It's like someone is always telling you what to do. OK, that's

part of it. Who can tell me more? Martin? I think... Is it a type of dinosaur?

Teacher: You're thinking of a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. *Tyrannosaurus* and *tyranny* have the same base, so you're on the right track. Let's keep thinking. Does anyone else know what *tyranny* means? [Two kids raise their hands.] Chandrea?

Chandrea: It's like you're mean.

Teacher: Well, that's part of it but not quite. [She scans the room. Students slouch in their seats and try to avoid eye contact.] How about you, Valeria? Do you know what *tyranny* means?

Valeria: Nope.

Teacher: OK, I guess I'll just tell you. *Tyranny* means...

In this teaching scenario, the teacher is off to a good start because she has correctly identified the story's Tier II words, such as *tyranny*. She assumes that her students either don't know anything about the word or that their knowledge is incomplete or erroneous. Therefore, she needs to teach the word's meaning. So far so good. The lesson takes a turn for the worse, however, when the teacher tries to teach the students an unknown word by first asking them what it means. When the questioning strategy doesn't work with the first student (and why would it?), she proceeds to ask other students, over and over again.

In this "guessing game" method of vocabulary instruction, a few knowledgeable and engaged students attempt to guess the meaning of the word. Maybe one of them will hit the jackpot. Meanwhile, the restof the class is sitting quietly, staring into space, fidgeting, or worse. Of course, the clock is ticking. The teacher has used up two minutes of instructional time, and no one knows what the word means. Multiply these two minutes by five vocabulary words, and we find that this teacher will spend 10 minutes of instructional time on what amounts to a gameof 20+ questions. Although a guessing game can be fun for students who know the answer, it isn't an effective way to teach the meaning of a word to those who don't. A more effective way is to teach

the meaning directly, without guessing, and in a time-efficient fashion.

What It Is. Here's what an effective direct instruction routine looks like: First, write the word and its definition on a blackboard, smartboard, or poster. Make sure you translate the dictionary language into kid-friendly language. Then, use a script like the one below to teach the meaning of the word. Finally, repeat the process, using a brisk pace of instruction, for the remainder of the five words.

- The teacher says, "Here's a new word: ___. Say it." The students say the word.

- The teacher says, "___ means ___. What does ___ mean?" The students repeat the definition.

- The teacher uses the vocabulary word in a sentence and then asks, "What does that mean?" If the students don't know, the teacher quickly and directly supplies the answer and has the students repeat it.

- The teacher provides another example and asks, "What does that mean?" The teacher follows up with a request for clarification.

- The teacher gives a nonexample.Here's what the script will sound like using the word *tyranny*: Teacher: The vocabulary word is

The routine is short, sweet, and powerful. Remember to keep your pace of instruction brisk. Once you get good at remembering the script, you'll be able to effectively introduce five to seven new words in about 10 minutes.

Notice that I said *introduce* the new words. To truly master the definition and usage of any new vocabulary word, students need many exposures to the word and time to process it deeply. Background knowledge, attention to the task, the ability to remember, and motivation to learn are just a few factors that impact how many encounters are needed to memorize and understand a word and its meaning. Becauseof these many variables, it's difficult to give the

definitive number of repetitions that it takes until a student learns a new word, and the number of necessary exposures varies according to the abilities of each student. Estimates in the literature vary from six to 20 exposures, but at least 10 is the number that I'm most familiar with (Webb, 2007).

Regardless of the actual number, you must assume that your students will need a lot of exposures to each word, certainly more than the three that are gained when you first introduce it, point it out in the story, and review it before the test. This means you'll need more than just direct instruction. You'll need the vocabulary card method! This method is one way to create opportunities for exposure and deep processing and to teach, assess, and review vocabulary words.

The Vocabulary Card Method: Many Chops in One

If you're currently using a teaching routine that asks students to memorize vocabulary words for a week, take a test on them, and then never use those words again (because you're moving on to a new story and a new set of words), I think you should put that routine on a high shelf and quickly walk away. My suggestion is that you replace it with a card-based routine that allows students to regularly interact, week after week, with an ever-increasing number of words. As students repeatedly encounter vocabulary words over a long period of time, they'll learn and remember the meanings of dozens of words. More importantly, they'll have the chance to develop working vocabularies. That is, they'll be more likely to use a variety of nuanced words when they speak and write, and they'll be more likely to understand these words when they hear them in conversations and read them in a book.

The vocabulary card method is an instructional routine that my mother introduced to me two decades ago, although over the years, I've tweaked it in various ways. The fourth and fifth graders in my learning support room loved this regularly occurring activity, and my current crop of third-grade regular education students enjoy it, too.

The vocabulary card method is a number of well-researched and highly

effective instructional techniques rolled into one. In the method, you'll find direct and explicit instruction, whole-group physical response, task analysis and mastery learning, explicit modeling and practice, and formative assessment. Add a think-pair-share routine (from the social and cooperative learning category), and you will have covered every one of the six teaching chops. The vocabulary card method is like the amazing Ginzu knife of the 1970s: It slices, dices, chops, and minces!

At first, you'll use the vocabulary list from your basal's anthology story. (Remember that you've already modified this list to include only Tier II base words.) Later, you can expand the method to include words from your guided reading books. If you like, you can even include words from other subject areas, such as science and social studies.

Remember, this method takes the place of vocabulary activities that are outlined and scripted in your teacher's manual. More importantly, it takes the place of vocabulary worksheets and practice book pages. Thus, do *not* assign the worksheets and practice book pages that you assigned to students in past years! You must create time to do the vocabulary card method, and one way to free up time is to jettison workbook pages and less than effective manual activities. You'll also need time to choose the most appropriate words. Do this during your planning time rather than spending time correcting worksheets and practice book pages.

The vocabulary card method is an effective way to teach vocabulary words because it teaches vocabulary words to mastery by giving students repeated opportunities to see, say, and use the words; it's visual, verbal, and kinesthetic; and it provides multiple opportunities for studentsto deeply process the meanings of the words. This deep processing,in which students concentrate on word meanings and the words' relationships to one another, is extremely important.

Write It, Draw It, Bag It

First, chose your five or six vocabulary words for the week. Teach them using the direct instruction routine described previously. Make sure the definitions are kid friendly. Basals often do the work for you

and give easily digestible definitions, but watch out for definitions that are too wordy or complex or contain words that demand additional definitions.

Next, have the kids write each word on a 2" × 3" inch index card. Then, ask them to copy your corresponding kid-friendly definition onto the back of each card. The students should leave enough room to include a small picture that illustrates the definition. These pictures, illustrating some of the more difficult words, can be drawn later in the week, perhaps on day 2 or 3 of your instructional sequence.

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A picture is especially important when the vocabulary word is an abstract one like *astonish* or *tyranny*. When a student connects the word to a visual image, the abstract is made more concrete. Thus, a student may draw a surprised-looking face for *astonish* or a mean-looking king for *tyranny*. An additional benefit comes from the act of drawing. The vocabulary card method is multimodal instruction (which helps build more neural pathways) that includes writing, drawing, physically manipulating, and orally reading the cards.

When your students draw pictures, some of them will want to go all Michelangelo or Georgia O'Keefe on you. To use your instructional time more efficiently, model stick figure drawings and set a time limit for each illustration. Likewise, you may need to offer suggestions for an illustration. The kids only need of couple of minutes to draw a simple picture on each card. The main focus should be on a simple visual that conveys the meaning of the word.

Cards at various stages of completion (word, definition, simple drawing) are placed in a ziplock bag with the student's name on it. These bags are then placed into the student's reading folder, a common bin, or some other easily accessible place.

Read, Sort, and Assess. In the future, the kids will pull out their cards and practice reading, arranging, and sorting their words. At first, you'll need to repeatedly model and practice the process (see value 4: teaching chops [instructional expertise].) Students are expected to take

out their cards, quietly read each word, turn over the card, study the picture, and quietly read the definition. Practice this during a specified time in whole-group instruction.

Also teach the kids, through modeling and guided practice, how to order the words alphabetically and conduct various types of word sorts, such as sorting the cards into piles based on the number of syllables, parts of speech, and story theme. Later, after your guided reading groups are up and running and you've thoroughly taught your students the vocabulary card routine, the students can independently practice their words during independent reading and writing time (see Figure 3.1). All you have to do is write, "Study vocabulary words," on your I Can... chart. For more on all of this, see Chapter 6.

Each week, when new words are introduced, the students createthe word cards and add them to their bag. As the weeks go by, the kids build up an ever-increasing pile of vocabulary words. Every two or three weeks, assess the words. Use a checklist to keep track of who has read his or her words and how many words each student knows. WheneverI have a couple of minutes, I pull a student aside and say, "Please read your vocabulary words to me." For some words, I spot-check, asking the student to tell me what the word means or to use the word in a sentence. I often double-check the words that are more abstract or that I know may be difficult.

Words correctly pronounced and explained go into a stack that's secured with a rubber band. Unknown and mispronounced words stay loose. These loose cards become the focus of future study. I call these words the "practice makes perfect" pile. Once a month or so, I ask for volunteers to read through their entire rubber band stack. Kids beam when they fluently read and define 50 or more vocabulary words!

Figure 3.1. Students Doing Word Sorts

Vocabulary cards are great for whole-group activities. I'd suggestyou start by teaching your students how to order them alphabetically. If the students have a low number of cards, such as 15 or less, they can alphabetize every card. If they have a lot of cards, have them alphabetize the words that they need to practice (only the loose cards). Another option is to have the class count out 10 random words from their rubber band stack and alphabetize these words. When the kids all have their words in alphabetical order, randomly call on a student to read his or her words, or ask for a volunteer.

One of the many beauties of alphabetizing vocabulary words is that every student can have different words. Thus, this activity expands into differentiation. You can further differentiate by having some students work with a buddy. You will, of course, need to meander and monitor. This movement is critical to the collection of formative assessment data. Note on a sticky note, checklist, or teacher data sheet which students have mastered the skill and which have not.

Closed and Open Word Sorts

After you've taught your students the process for alphabetizing their vocabulary cards, teach them how to conduct a word sort. Word sorts help students recognize linguistic or semantic relationships among

words. In a word sort activity, no paper or pencil is used. Kids read, think, and physically move cards to show skill- based or meaning relationships among the words for any given category, such as verbs and nouns, words with two or three syllables, or words related to stories or themes.

Word sorts can be used in two ways: closed or open. In a closed word sort, the teacher provides the categories. In an open word sort, students group words into categories that they construct. I'll first describe a closed word sort, using select words from three stories (*Wolf!*, *What's in Store for the Future?*, and Franklyn M. Branley's *The Planets in Our Solar System*) in the Treasures third-grade anthology.

Other than *solar system*, which I consider to be a Tier III word, I chose the following words because they're Tier II words (words that are seen and used frequently and have a high degree of utility). Each word, regardless of how it first appeared in the manual, is written as a base word.

• *Wolf!: ache, admire, bother, concentrate, passion, splendid*

• *What's in Store for the Future?: entertain, object, predict*

• *The Planets in Our Solar System: dim, farther, solar system, telescope*

Let's pretend that your class has read all three stories. You've directly taught the meanings of all 13 words, and the students now have 13 vocabulary cards in their ziplock bags. To do a closed word sort by story, your students will need to have the same cards, or at least mostly the same cards. Ask the students to sort their cards into three piles: one for *Wolf!*, one for *What's in Store for the Future?*, and one for *The Planets in Our Solar System*. Although some students may sort the cards exactly as listed above, I bet many won't. One thing you should not do is automatically identify a card as incorrectly sorted when it doesn't match the original list from its associated story. Word sorts are never a brute memorization task. When you see that some students have created sorts that don't match the initial story lists, ask questions

such as these: "Tywan, why did you put *object* here?" and "Sarah, you put *object* in a different pile. Why?" If you've done a good job of teaching your students that learning is about thinking deeply and explaining their thought processes, rather than just about memorization, your kids will enter into these discussions with eagerness.

If a student places a word from one story in the pile of another story *and* can justify that word's inclusion with a well-reasoned explanation, then count it as correct and praise the student's thinking. After all, you want the kids to understand the nuances of meaning and the multiple relationships that each word has to key concepts.

Here's an example of one student's sort (by story title):

• *Wolf!: ache, admire, bother, entertain, passion, splendid*

• *What's in Store for the Future?: predict*

• *The Planets in Our Solar System: concentrate, dim, farther, object, solar system, telescope*

You'll notice that the words *concentrate* and *object*, originally found in the *Wolf!* and *What's in Store for the Future?* stories, are now sorted into the pile for *The Planets in Our Solar System*. Additionally, the word *entertain* has migrated from *What's in Store for the Future?* to *Wolf!*

As you go around the room and have the students read their sorts, follow up with *why* questions. Here's what a sort discussion might sound like:

Hunter: Angel has *object* in the category for *The Planets in Our Solar System*. It's supposed to be in *What's in Store for the Future?*

Teacher: Angel, tell us why you put the word *object* in the pile for *The Planets in Our Solar System*.

Angel: Planets are objects. You can see them with a telescope.

Teacher: Planets are indeed objects. Good answer, Angel. Youcan keep

that word there. I see you have *concentrate* in your pile for *The Planets in Our Solar System*, too. Does anyone else have *concentrate* in that pile?

Emily: I do.Teacher: Emily, why is *concentrate* in your pile for *The Planets in*

Our Solar System?Emily: Because you have to concentrate to look through a

telescope. The planets are really small. Teacher: Good reasoning, Emily. Keep that word there.

Another type of closed word sort is the skill-based sort: Students sort their words into piles based on the number of syllables (one, two, three, four, or more), parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and others), or phonic patterns (open syllable, closed syllable, short vowel sound, prefix/ suffix, etc.). Figure 3.2a shows two examples of closed word sorts, one for syllables and one for parts of speech, and Figure 3.2b shows what the cards actually look like.

Notice that even though a sort for parts of speech is technically closed, it has an open quality to it. Why? Because words like *ache* and *bother* are, according to use, both nouns and verbs. These words, and how students have sorted them into different categories, can be points of discussion and opportunities for learning when you discuss the sorts with your students.

In an open word sort, students create their own semantic constructions. An open word sort is useful when you want to assesshow students impose organization onto words that belong to a particular semantic network (or category). In this type of sort, you'll give the students a choice of how many categories to create. Usually the choice is provided as a range, such as two or three, or three or four. This provides support for a challenging task.

To begin an open word sort, say to your class, "I want you to think about the meanings of your words and how they relate to one another. If you were to sort your words into two or three categories, what would

they be?" After you give them 10–15 seconds of think time, say, "I want you to sort your vocabulary words into two or three piles. Each pile should be a specific category. When you're done, you'll have to tell me why you sorted your words into those particular piles."

If you've already taught your students how to perform closed word sorts (phonic elements, parts of speech, syllables, etc.), some students will automatically go there. For example, some students might sort *ache*, *admire*, and *object* into one pile because they all begin with a vowel. The words in the second pile would typically all begin with consonants. Other students will think more deeply about the sort. Either way, open word sorts provide a wealth of learning objectives to talk about.

There are numerous opportunities toinclude more teaching chops in the vocabulary card method. When your students take out15 of their vocabulary cards and put them in alphabetical order, they're responding as a group in a physical manner. If all of your students have the same words, have them do a choral reador an echo read. This type of repeated word reading not only builds vocabulary but also gives the kids another shot at practicing their reading, and it's another opportunity to build in group response.

As you teach the vocabulary card method, don't forget to explicitly model each step. If you want the kids to put the words in alphabetical order, model that for them, directly and explicitly. Simple closed word sorts, such as a sort by syllables, won't take much modeling, but more complex sorts, such as by theme or parts of speech, will take multiple modeling sessions.
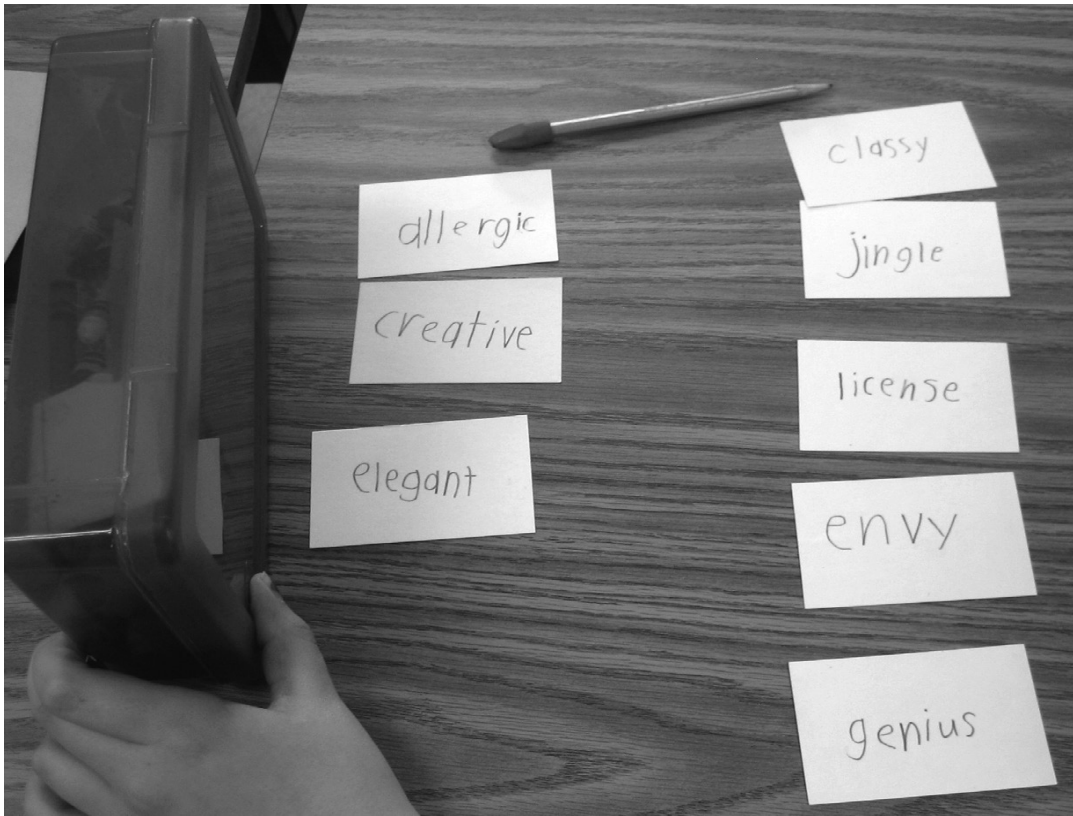
Modeling should be followed by several sessions of guided group practice. Then, make sure you give the students numerous opportunities to practice independently. Multiple opportunities to practice are crucial for mastery learning. One of my beefs with basal vocabulary instructionis that few, if any, vocabulary words are ever taught to mastery. There's simply no way that a fourth or fifth grader, let alone a first or second grader, is going to master 20 vocabulary words introduced over four weeks (and by *master*, I mean recall 90% of their words, truly understand their meanings, and even use some in authentic speech and writing) unless those words are repeatedly pronounced out loud, linked to definitions, sorted by category, applied in written sentences, and spoken in conversations. Unlike the traditional basal instructional method of minimal discussion, a couple of worksheets, and a summative weekly test, the vocabulary card method gives students many exposures to multiple vocabulary words week after week.

When you give students multiple opportunities to read, say, and explore the relationships among vocabulary words, you increase the chance that they'll use the words during writing, understand the words during reading, and remember the words over time.

Formative Assessments: Is It Working?

The vocabulary card method is formative assessment at its best. Because formative assessments are ongoing—essential skills must be monitored multiple times over the course of each quarter, semester, and year—they need to be quick and easy to give and score. In the case of vocabulary cards, you can assess your students' mastery of word pronunciation and meaning every time they have their cards out. And because the cards don't go away, assessment is available at any time. To assess how many words a student knows, simply pull a student's rubber band stack and count the cards. These spot-check assessments can occur as often as you like. I try to formally record each student's progress at least once every three weeks. A simple way to manage this is to divide your class into thirds and assess one of the three groups each week.

In the end, this new type of cumulative and kinesthetic vocabulary instruction is well worth the time. The method actually leads to vocabulary mastery. Your students will enjoy the process, and best of all, they may actually remember and use the vocabulary words when they write and speak, something that rarely occurs when you review a set of vocabulary words, assess them once, and then move on to a new set of words.