The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary: The Whys and Hows

Ashley G. Cummings, M.S.

Rebekah E. Piper, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Educator and Leadership Preparation

Texas A&M University-San Antonio

Ramona T. Pittman, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Educator and Leadership Preparation

Texas A& M University- San Antonio

Ashley G. Cummings is a December 2016 graduate of Texas A&M University-San Antonio. She received her Masters of Science degree in Reading. Currently, Ashley is a teacher in San Antonio. Email: AshleyG.Cummings@jaguar.tamu.edu.

Rebekah E. Piper is an assistant professor in the Department of Educator and Leadership Preparation. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education. Her research interests include: children's literature, multicultural education, and literacy development. Email: Rebekah.Piper@tamusa.edu.

Ramona T. Pittman is an associate professor in the Department of Educator and Leadership Preparation. She has seven years of teaching experience in PK-12. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy. Her research interests include: literacy development, struggling readers, and teacher preparation. Email: Ramona.Pittman@tamusa.edu.

Abstract

This article focuses on providing teachers with the whys and hows to implement tier-two vocabulary instruction in PK-12 grade classrooms. The article examines what is meant by tier-two vocabulary words and the need for increased vocabulary instruction to gain word knowledge. It also offers teachers applicable texts and activities to be used when they become teachers and ways to incorporate a school-to-home connection in support of students' learning of new vocabulary words. The texts and activities are divided into three grade levels: K-2, 3-5, and 6-12. In addition, the article is divided into two sections, which outlines the whys and hows for increasing students' vocabulary knowledge.

Keywords: *tier-two vocabulary, word knowledge, literacy development, authentic literature*

The Importance of Teaching Vocabulary: The Whys and Hows

The knowledge of words and word meanings is vital for the academic success of students. Vocabulary, is defined by Stahl (2005) as knowledge; not simply a definition but an understanding of how a word fits into the world. Vocabulary word knowledge can be understood through listening and reading, known as receptive vocabulary and through words spoken and written, known as productive or expressive vocabulary. There are nearly 600,000-800,000 words in the English language; therefore, it makes learning new vocabulary an ongoing process. The average student begins first grade with approximately 6,000 words of spoken language (Chall, 1983). Students will continue to learn roughly 3,000 more words each year. (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013). Subsequently, there are some words that require more teaching than others. The question that practitioners continue to ask is, "*How do we determine which words that need to be taught to increase vocabulary knowledge in PK-12 education*".

The Importance of Increasing Vocabulary Knowledge: The Whys

Vocabulary is a critical skill needed to successfully comprehend through listening and reading. One of the main skills that teachers will be expected to teach in the elementary grades is teaching a student to read and gain meaning from the text. Learning to read is a continuum and continues with secondary teachers' ability to be able to teach students how to analyze and critique what they read (Chall, 1983). Students will not be successful at comprehending *any* texts if they do not know the meaning of the words in which they are decoding. For many, lack of vocabulary knowledge could be a reason that students are not able to access the meaning of a text.

Moreover, Hart and Risley (1995) determined that a huge discrepancy exist between students who grow up in a welfare family versus a working-class family versus a professional

family. During the first four years of a child's life, in a professional household, children heard 45 million words, while children in working-class households heard 26 million words, and children from welfare households heard only 11 million words. (Please note that this includes the total number of words even if words were repeated.) Generally, the words heard by children in professional households were words of affirmation (encouraging words) per hour, while children in welfare households heard more prohibitions per hour (*no, stop,* etc.).

With the gap in the amount of words children hear prior to PreK, preservice teachers must be equipped with strategies to attempt to close the gap. Many strategies exist that can be used during vocabulary instruction to increase student word knowledge. Even so, the National Reading Panel (NRP; 2000) suggest that students should learn vocabulary through a variety of methods, and no single method is optimum. If a method such as direct instruction is used, students still need to receive repeated and multiple exposure to the new vocabulary words. Given this knowledge, not only must preservice teachers be taught how to determine an appropriate strategy to teach, they must also be able to consider students' prior knowledge of words. Familiarity with students' prior word knowledge allows teachers to determine which words they need to implement in their classrooms. Careful consideration is needed when determining which new words to teach. As a result, the Three-Tier System (Beck & McKeown, 1985) should be implemented to assist preservice teachers in this dilemma. In this article, the three tier system will be introduced and discussed. In addition, this article will focus on providing tier-two vocabulary instruction through the use of authentic literature and activities which can be implemented with students in PK-12 classrooms.

The three tier system classifies words based on level of utility or tier (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Tier-one vocabulary words consist of basic, every day words, such as *happy,*

tree, mom, and *shirt*, and sight words, such as *and, come, the,* and *from*. Both sets of words generally do not require much direct instruction because most students already know what these words mean and/or the function of the word. (Please note that these words may have to be taught for students who are English Language Learners or students with severe, limited language experiences.) Tier-two words are likely to appear frequently in a wide variety of texts and in the written and oral language of mature language users. Words such as *curious, consequence, attention,* and *examine* are tier-two words. Lastly, tier-three words consist of low- frequency words that are in specific domains such as school, hobbies, weather, or a specific content area (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013). Words such as *isotope, parabola, Petri dish,* and *fundamentalism* are Tier-Three words.

Unless teaching a content specific lesson or subject, teachers should focus their vocabulary instruction on implementing tier-two words, as tier-two words are words used frequently by mature language users. These words are not meant to be mastered through independent study but through conversation, direct instruction, and multiple-repeated exposure. Additionally, tier-two words are important for reading comprehension as they contain multiple meanings, are used across a variety of environments, and are words that allow students to describe concepts in a detailed manner (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013). In order to decipher which words are tier-two, Hiebert (2009) suggests that teachers ask three questions 1) is the word needed to fully comprehend the text? 2) is the word likely to appear in future texts from any discipline? and 3) is the word part of a word family or sematic network where you can use one word to introduce several? For example, the word *migration* share the same derivative as *immigrant* and *emigrate*. While the Three-Tier system is beneficial in supporting student learning, teachers must use their own judgment of students needs when selecting words to teach

(Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013). When selected appropriately, tier-two words can be very useful and productive when implemented in lessons and used in the context of classroom discussions.

Tier-two vocabulary knowledge influences student comprehension skills. Comprehension takes place in the transaction between the reader and the text (Kucer, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978). If a student demonstrates difficulty in deciphering vocabulary, they will likely have a strenuous time understanding key points of a text, leading to difficulty in comprehension. When a student demonstrates difficulty in recalling key details such as the plot of a story, character names, and setting, it becomes evident that the student lacks foundational literacy experiences. Furthermore, background knowledge is an indicator of likeliness that students are able to connect to a text (Butcher & Kintsch, 2003; Schallert & Martin, 2003). Thus, the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension reinforce the need for supporting preservice teachers in identifying pedagogical practices and strategies that will increase students' word knowledge through vocabulary instruction.

A best practice for introducing new vocabulary is to implement a variety of children's literature in classrooms through interactive read alouds (National Reading Panel, 2000). Successful vocabulary instruction through literature would require teachers to select authentic literature; increasing student motivation, enthusiasm, and interest in reading (Billman, 2002; Chick, 2006; Zambo, 2005). While there is not one simple definition for authentic literature (Harris & Hodges, 1995), authentic texts vary among picture books, novels, and informational texts (Ciecierski & Bintz, 2015). Not only will tier-two vocabulary be taught through children's literature but also through oral and written language among the teacher and students. Implementing new vocabulary words through these strategies provides students with a variety of different words, thus affording students the opportunity to describe objects in writing and adds

creativity to their work. Adding tier-two words assures that students will be able to describe and be more specific with key vocabulary words that previously were unfamiliar. Providing students with this knowledge will also increase their written and oral communication skills, ultimately, benefiting their academic and professional success.

Tier-two words are known to be difficult, yet easily found in classrooms. For this reason, these words must become part of the daily instruction in schools if teachers want their students to be successful. Exploring these words can also increase students' motivation for reading and writing. Finally, introducing tier-two vocabulary does not exclude lower grade levels. While word acquisition may be different for all students, it is important to remember that they will acquire new words by vocabulary size rather than grade level (Biemiller, 2005). Recognizing the importance of word acquisition, examples of authentic literature that utilizes tier-two vocabulary paired with activities are detailed in the following section to provide practitioners with activities and strategies to implement in their classroom. These activities are ones that can be easily transferred to a home-based activity, promoting parental engagement with literacy development.

The Importance of Increasing Vocabulary Knowledge: The Hows

In an effort to expand pedagogical practices and increase parental involvement when it comes to student learning, teacher preparation programs must teach preservice teachers how to establish routine classroom activities and familiarize parents with the variety of activities that can be implemented at home. Authentic children's literature can be used as early as Pre-K to second grade, to include literature that contains tier-two vocabulary such as *Jangles a Big Fish Story* (Shannon, 2012), *Giraffes Can't Dance* (Andreae, 2012), *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991), and *A Bad Case of Stripes* (Shannon, 2007). These individual stories include tier-two vocabulary (e.g., *wondrous, fellow, smithereens, extraordinary, elegant, humorous*, and *bizarre*). Combining

these stories with meaningful activities will increase student motivation and mastery of tier-two vocabulary words. One example includes the game *Play Swat.* For this game, the teacher places the tier-two vocabulary words on either the whiteboard or on the wall. Then, separate the class into two teams. Two individual team members will each receive a fly swatter. The two team members will come to the front of the class, and the teacher will give a definition or picture of one of the words on the wall. The team members will identify the correct word by "swatting" the word on the board using their fly swatter. Whoever identifies the correct word first, will receive a point for their team. This activity can be modified for parents to engage in at-home learning activities with their child based on student's needs.

Furthermore, as children become familiar with tier-two vocabulary, the engagement with literature will expand in third through fifth grade with novels like *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) and *Rain Reign* (Martin, 2014). Students increase their vocabulary knowledge with words like *injustice, desperate, inconsiderate, overwhelmed, directional*, and *diagnosis*. Teachers and parents can create an entertaining activity with a beach ball where students lightly toss the beach ball in the air. As each student catches the ball, the student has to identify the definition for the word that his right or left thumb is touching. This game can be repeated until every student has had a chance to define a word. Likewise, an alternative process would be to have the definitions on the beach ball, and students would be responsible for identifying the tier-two vocabulary word. Again, for a school-to-home connection, this activity can be implemented at home with the parent and child.

Through advanced vocabulary instruction, students will gain word knowledge that will support their academic journey through the middle and high school years in grades six through twelve. It is vital that the continuation of strong literacy instruction remain as students become

proficient readers. Students in the respective grade levels may experience difficulty in identifying texts that are relevant to their interests, however, the need for detailed vocabulary instruction continues to be significant. Strong instruction can be enhanced through texts like *The Silver Star* (Walls, 2013) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (Hosseini, 2013). Each of these texts introduce tier-two words such as *disdain, complacent, candid, voracious, repulsive*, and *infatuated*. Students who are advancing their vocabulary knowledge find choice activities to be more appealing.

Three examples of these types of activities include creating an encyclopedia with newly acquired vocabulary words, providing students the opportunity to create vocabulary packets, and the opportunity to reflect upon their vocabulary learning through the use of reflective or interactive journals. The encyclopedia consists of a notebook with each word dedicated to a page and placed in alphabetical order. On each page, the student is expected to write the word, write the definition, include a picture, and add any other pertinent information about the word. Vocabulary packets utilize a word wall with tier-one words. Under each tier-one word will be baggies with tier-two word choices, which will especially aid in including diverse vocabulary in their writing. Lastly, a reflective or interactive journal can be kept by each student to reflect upon the vocabulary word and their understanding of the word. Teachers can allow students to write a story, poetry, etc. in their journal utilizing the current vocabulary words. The three of these activities are student centered, created by individual students, and can be utilized as tools for the students, thus, creating independent learners.

The NRP (2000) suggests that multimedia is a strategy to increase students' vocabulary knowledge. As an extension to authentic literature, students can use many multimedia applications (app) and websites, outside of the classroom to provide a school-to-home

connection, especially for those students in middle and high school. Some multimedia resources include: www.flocabulary.com, Charades! (app), and www.visuwords.com. First, Flocabulary is a website designed to provide students with videos, rap songs, and activities centered on literacy and especially vocabulary. Middle school and high school students can create their own vocabulary rap song and develop a video to pair with the song based upon their book. In addition, students can peruse the Charades! app to determine how to develop a charades game based upon the vocabulary from their text. Lastly, Visuwords is a website that offers students a unique word web of their vocabulary word(s). The students will simply type their word, and the website will create a word web that displays synonyms, antonyms, parts of speech, and relationships to the target word. In addition, the student can hover the mouse over each word in the word web and the definition will appear. Each of these resources will provide students with interactive, engaging vocabulary activities.

Engaging students in high academic instruction in all subject areas will support word knowledge and vocabulary. The essential focus area for teachers must be introducing and modeling tier-two vocabulary and academic language through interactive instruction. The students will acquire additional vocabulary when the instruction is paired with authentic literature. For this reason, preservice teachers should be encouraged to use authentic literature outside of scripted curriculum to engage students and effectively increase word knowledge. The NRP (2000) suggests implementing interactive read alouds as an approach for vocabulary instruction. With this prior knowledge, we argue that all children in grades PK-12 need tier-two vocabulary instruction through interactive read alouds of authentic literature in order to develop a high academic vocabulary for literacy development and to be successful learners.

References

Andreae, G., & Parker-Rees, G. (2001). *Giraffes can't dance*. New York: Orchard Books.

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2013). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Biemiller, A. (2004). Teaching vocabulary in the primary grades. In J.F. Baumann and E.J. Kame'enui (eds.), *Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice.* New York: Guilford.

Billman, L. (2002). Aren't these books for little kids? *Educational Leadership, 60*(3), 48–51.

Butcher, K.R., & Kintsch, W. (2003). Text comprehension and discourse processing. In A.F. Healy & R.W. Proctor (Vol. Eds.) & I.B. Weiner (Ed.-in-Chief), Handbook of psychology, Volume 4, Experimental psychology (pp. 575–595). New York: Wiley.

Charades! (2016). FatChicken Studios. (Version 2.4) [Mobile Application Software]. Retrieved from http://itunes.apple.com

Chick, K. (2006). Fostering student collaboration through the use of historical picture books. *The Social Studies, 97*(4), 152–157. doi: 10.3200/TSSS.97.4.152-157

Ciecierski, L. M., & Bintz, W. P. (2015). Using Authentic Literature to Develop Challenging and Integrated Curriculum: This Article Acknowledges the Difficulties in Using Authentic Literature Instead of Predictable and Linear Textbooks, while Articulating Methods for Developing an Alternative Practice That Promises the Nurturing of Lifelong Literacy as a Spillover Benefit. *Middle School Journal*, *46*(5), 17-25.

Flocabulary. (2016). Retrieved from https://www.flocabulary.com/.

Harris, T.L. & Hodges, R.E. (ed). (1995). *The literacy dictionary: The vocabulary of reading and writing.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Hart, B. & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Henkes, K. (1991). *Chrysanthemum.* New York: HarperCollins.

Hosseini, K. (2013). *And the mountains echoed.* London: Bloomsbury.

Kucer, S.B. (2001). Dimensions of literacy: A conceptual base of teaching reading and writing in school settings. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Martin, A. M. (2014). Rain Reign. New York: MacMillan.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Rosenblatt, L.R. (1978). The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Schallert, D.L., & Martin, D.B. (2003). A psychological analy- sis of what teachers and students do in the language arts classroom. In J. Flood, D. Lapp, J.R. Squire, & J.M. Jensen (Eds.), Handbook of research on teaching the English language arts (pp. 31–45). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Shannon, D. (2012). *Jangles: A big fish story*. New York: Scholastic.

Shannon, D. (2007). *A bad case of stripes.* New York: Scholastic.

Walls, J. (2013). *The silver star.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

White, E. B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*. New York: HarperCollins.

Vocabulary Games and Resources (2016). Retrieved from http://www.vocabulary.co.il/.

Zambo, D. (2009). Using visual literacy to help adolescents understand how images influence

their lives. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 41*(6), 60–67.