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Focus Deeply on Words that Matter! *by Nonie Lesaux*

Vocabulary learning is an enormous task for all students; in order to be academically successful, students must leave high school with a working understanding of about 50,000 words. It's estimated that students reading at grade level learn 2,000 to 3,000 words a year in the context of reading print, which is not the case for students who are struggling. This relationship has major implications for instruction. For all learners, including English language learners (ELLs), vocabulary and reading comprehension have a reciprocal relationship—while greater vocabulary leads to greater comprehension, better comprehension also leads to learning more vocabulary words.

Research has found that academic vocabulary, the specialized and sophisticated language of text, is a particular source of difficulty for students who struggle with comprehension, especially ELLs. Many of these students have generally good foundational skills for word reading and many even read the print fluently, but don't understand deeply what they read. For example, a group of 8th grade Spanish-speaking ELLs enrolled in U.S. classrooms since the primary grades shows a common profile: grade-level word reading skills coupled with vocabulary and comprehension levels about two grade levels below.

Academic vocabulary is different from basic or conversational vocabulary and essential for academic success because it carries with it many important concepts that students need to know; but for many students, it must be explicitly taught. And in spite of the fact that gaps in reading performance are often associated with gaps in academic vocabulary knowledge and the conceptual knowledge that comes with it, deliberate, sustained instruction to develop students' academic vocabulary knowledge occurs infrequently in most classrooms across the U.S. and Canada. Estimates suggest that in kindergarten through second grade classrooms, only between 10 percent and 28 percent of academic

time focuses on explicit instruction in this area, while by the middle school years, this number is about 10 percent, and much of this instruction is incidental in nature, like providing a definition for a word in passing.

Much more instructional time is needed to build students' academic vocabulary skills, and during this teaching we have to give students lots of structured, planned opportunities to learn and use their oral language skills. Good vocabulary teaching involves a lot of talk and practice using language. It also involves giving students the language to talk about the concepts they know and to craft their explanations and arguments. Therefore, the problem for teachers and curricula to address, as soon as possible, is three-fold:

1. We need to spend more time on planned vocabulary teaching in our classrooms.
2. We need to focus carefully on the words we choose to teach.
3. We also need to teach word-learning strategies.

“Good vocabulary teaching involves a lot of talk and practice using language.”

1 We need to spend more time on planned vocabulary teaching in our classrooms

Students need to learn how to think about language and how words work. And in learning new words, students need to have a deep understanding of the concept that the word represents. This learning process takes time; this means an instructional plan that builds in opportunities to learn words over an extended period of time, providing multiple exposures across the lesson cycle, and using the words in different ways—reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Our goal should be to help students attain the deep understanding that Beck and McKeown (1991) described as truly “knowing” a word: “a rich, decontextualized knowledge of each word’s meaning, including

its relationship to other words, and its extension to metaphorical use.” Many students have only a narrow sense of a word, or what Graves calls “narrow-context bound knowledge.” An example would be thinking that the concept of substitute is a teacher. These students need to develop a deep, decontextualized understanding of the concept behind the word to use it appropriately in academic discussion or writing. For example, understanding the concept of substitution and the many ways in which substitution can take place.

This means we need to carefully consider the number of words we teach and the time we allot to those words. In many classrooms it is common practice to teach a large number of words per week from a list or workbook, an approach that results in relatively shallow word knowledge that is rarely maintained for the long-term. Under these circumstances, students are often taught to look up words in the dictionary when they don’t know their meanings. However, research tells us that dictionary definitions are inaccessible to most students. ELLs and other learners who need strong support to learn words need lots of relevant examples and explanations that use familiar language, yet dictionaries are organized with abbreviated definitions to conserve space and fit as many entries as possible.

The screenshot shows three pages from a vocabulary notebook. The first page is for the word 'growth' (gróth) noun, with a picture of a plant in a pot and the definition: 'A characteristic of this plant is white flowers. The growth of something is how much bigger it gets.' The second page is for 'produce' (pru-dús) verb, with a picture of a car on an assembly line and the definition: 'To produce means to make something. This factory produces cars.' The third page is a 'Talk Together' activity for 'produce' with a speech bubble asking 'What is a characteristic of some plants?' and a response bubble saying 'Some plants produce fruit.' At the bottom, it says 'Add words to My Vocabulary Notebook. NGReach.com'.

◀ **National Geographic Reach uses scaffolded word learning with**

- visuals
- context
- student-friendly definitions
- oral language activities

In contrast with these common practices, *National Geographic Reach* emphasizes a much deeper and more sustained approach to vocabulary instruction. This approach is appropriate for all students, but is particularly suited and designed for English learners, many of whom lack deep knowledge of academic words and how to use them appropriately in academic discussion and writing.

Vocabulary instruction in *National Geographic Reach* features extended and multi-faceted exposure to support academic vocabulary learning. The program focuses on thematic units that incorporate academic vocabulary and content vocabulary in the domains of science, social studies and math. Using these content-rich materials, lessons promote vocabulary learning through rich oral language instruction and repeated opportunities for students to use the words in listening, speaking, reading and writing. A strong focus on collaborative learning ensures that students have many opportunities to incorporate the words as part of their overall developing English language skills.

This rich vocabulary instruction follows a step-by-step cycle to ensure that it is a cumulative process that provides multiple scaffolded exposures, across contexts, to vocabulary words. Key vocabulary is presented in colorful and motivating formats in the student

PD12 Focus Deeply on Words that Matter!

Part 1 Vocabulary Skills Trace		Page
Day 1	Social Studies Vocabulary	T5
Day 2	Academic Vocabulary	T7
Day 3	Expand Word Knowledge	T10b
Day 4	Share Word Knowledge	T24b
Day 5	Apply Word Knowledge	T25b
Day 6	Multiple-Meaning Words	T26
Day 7	Multiple-Meaning Words	T31
Days 8–9	Extend Vocabulary	T32e–f
Day 10	Vocabulary Review	T32h

◀ A consistent 10-day plan provides frequent, varied opportunities for students to acquire and use vocabulary words and vocabulary strategies.

books. These words are introduced at the start of the 10-day lesson cycle using predictable routines in which students gain an initial understanding of the words and assess their own knowledge of them. As the lesson cycle progresses, students gain increasingly deeper knowledge of the words as they use them in multiple contexts.

Language learning is rich in songs, games, role-play, and colorful visuals. Older children learn key vocabulary through graphics, word webbing, and other research-based word-learning strategies. Oral language development and discussion plays an integral role in this teaching; *National Geographic Reach* focuses on oral language development to give students the words to talk about their ideas and about key academic information. Throughout the program, language frames are taught so students can use comparative expression. This practice using language helps with vocabulary learning and academic success.

The graphic is a blue-bordered box with the title 'Language Frames'. It contains four sentence starters: '_____ is _____ .', 'But _____ is _____ .', '_____ need _____ .', and 'And so do _____ .'

In order to engage students with meaningful learning, throughout *National Geographic Reach* teachers are asked to encourage students to share what they already know about each word and how it relates to their experiences, while also asking teachers to model their own personal connections to words. By allowing students to practice using words in many contexts, in their speech and in writing, students will better understand all the ways that the words can be used and have time to grapple with shades of meaning.

2 We need to focus carefully on the words we choose to teach

When we do spend time on vocabulary instruction, we need to make sure that we’re making the most of that time to improve students’ language and comprehension skills for success in all content areas. A crucial step to achieving this goal revolves around the words we choose to teach. This is especially important when teaching students, such as ELLs, with low vocabularies who need to learn lots of words deeply. Because truly knowing all levels and meanings of a word is a complex process, there is a growing consensus that vocabulary instruction should focus on deeply understanding a relatively small number of words.

We can't possibly "cover" or "teach" all the words students need to learn, but we can choose a set of words students need to be academically successful and then use those as a platform for teaching word-learning, for increasing academic talk, and for promoting more strategic reading of text. We call these words high-utility words.

This focus on high-utility words often represents a shift from current or past classroom practice and educational programs. Often these approaches have emphasized low-frequency, rare words (e.g., glint, burrowed) that appear in a given passage. These words can be relatively unimportant when we stack them up against all of the words that our ELLs and their classmates need to read for understanding.

For that reason, effective vocabulary instruction, such as that featured in *Reach*, must focus on high-impact academic words (e.g., debate, characteristic, observe) that are required for comprehending content and concepts. Spending precious instructional time on the deep learning of general-purpose academic words is much more valuable than targeting the low-frequency, rare words. In every unit, *Reach* focuses on teaching three sets of high-impact words, all of which represent key concepts:

- **Content vocabulary** The content words correspond with the unit's theme and are classified by subject area and are central to effective standards-based instruction. Examples of science vocabulary include habitat and root; examples of social studies vocabulary include immigration and globe; and examples of math vocabulary include equation and sum.
- **General-purpose academic words** These can be thought of as "delivery" words—the words that surround or are used to "deliver" the content. Examples of these words include balance, evidence, and solution.
- **Classroom vocabulary** In addition to high-utility academic and content area words, *Reach* focuses on important words that are specific to classroom procedures and skill instruction and that are essential for students to know for success in the classroom. Examples of these words are sequence and inference.

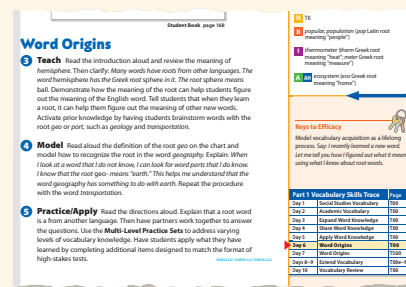
In addition to these three categories, *Reach* also provides support for teaching basic English words and concepts to newcomers and other students who are at the beginning levels of English acquisition.

3 We also need to teach word-learning strategies

As noted above, we can't possibly "cover" or "teach" all the words students need to learn, so we also need to equip them with strategies to try to figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word they encounter while reading. Students need to be directly instructed on how to figure out unfamiliar words. They are constantly coming up against words that they don't know in texts. They could skip them and potentially lose overall meaning, or be more constructive and pull the words apart, dig deeply enough to find a helpful context clue, think

of a related word that looks the same, or think about when they have heard the word before. What the student does at those crossroads will be determined by the strategies she has in her toolkit.

Teaching ELLs word-learning strategies provides them with an opportunity to develop their academic vocabulary skills and, in turn, to work through challenging text. *National Geographic Reach* texts, lessons, and student activities were designed with these principles in mind; the program includes a strong focus on word-learning strategies, so that students will gain the cognitive tools they need to learn a large number of words independently. The instruction focused on word-learning strategies takes many forms, including using context clues, analyzing word parts and root words for meaning, and practicing working with suffixes, prefixes, and affixes. These strategies need to become part of our ELLs' toolkits for oral language development and, ultimately, promote their reading comprehension skills.



Word learning strategies give students the skills they need to learn a large number of words independently.

Conclusion

In order to be academically successful, students must leave high school with a working understanding of about 50,000 words; greater vocabulary leads to greater comprehension, better comprehension also leads to learning more vocabulary words. Therefore, if we are to equip our ELLs for school success, a central part of instruction must focus on vocabulary learning. In the 21st century classroom, vocabulary teaching has to play a greater role and take up more instructional time than it has in years past (or than it typically has); this teaching must focus on a combination of direct instruction in high-utility words, across contexts and across a multi-day lesson cycle, and instruction in word-learning strategies. Good vocabulary teaching involves a lot of oral and written practice working with words, and it also involves giving students the language to talk about the concepts they know and to craft their explanations and arguments.