

Introduction

It is no news to teachers that vocabulary is the cornerstone of reading and writing. We know that students who are deficient in vocabulary often struggle with understanding what they read, which causes them to fall behind in content-area subjects, too. Success in school and the ability to acquire vocabulary are powerful reciprocals. The famous Matthew Effect applies to vocabulary, too: the “rich” get richer and the “poor” get poorer—those who read well will develop better vocabularies and do better academically while students who have trouble reading will read less, learn fewer words, and comprehend poorly.

By third and fourth grade, when the curriculum begins to focus around content-area textbooks and literature, teachers really begin to see the effects of the widening rich/poor vocabulary gap. English-language learners (ELLs) in those grades who may be able to communicate with their peers also struggle to attain academic English language vocabulary. All students will need strategies they can use to acquire new words and make them their own.

Research tells us that vocabulary instruction is important, and while there is general agreement that there may be no single, right way to teach vocabulary to all children, some common conditions do need to be met. For example, students need multiple exposures to vocabulary words taught with a variety of direct and indirect instructional methods and approaches. These include exposing children to a wide variety of books that appeal to their interests; introducing words in context; pre-teaching vocabulary prior to reading a selection; utilizing mnemonic devices, synonyms, antonyms, examples, and non-examples; and working to reveal multiple meanings. Teaching morphemes, or parts of words, like roots, prefixes, and suffixes, can give students tools for decoding new and unknown words. Words should be taught all day, every day.

One common characteristic runs throughout the research: Students need to be *actively involved* in learning vocabulary through what the National Reading Panel (2000) calls “multimodality-sensitive instruction.” Simply put, that means that students need to see, touch, and feel the words—to work with them actively. Since games and activities appeal to students, these seemed like a logical way to help them acquire vocabulary. And that is what *Active Word Play* is all about.

I developed and tested all the games and activities in *Active Word Play* with my own middle-school students. Each one takes advantage of the direct and indirect instructional-strategy approach that researchers like M.F. Graves (2006) advocate. I know from experience that they will encourage *all* of your students to engage in their own learning.

You can use these games as stand-alone, fun activities during instructional transitions, or to begin or end the day. Or, you can integrate them into ongoing work with literature, content-area texts in centers, or whole-class, small-group, or independent work.

How to Select Vocabulary Words

Your goal as you select vocabulary words should be to choose those that move students closer to a mature expression of their thoughts and feelings in speech and on paper and which help them understand academic language. But that can be a difficult task more akin to an art than a science. According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), there is simply no basis for determining which words students should be learning at different grade levels. Their two basic criteria for choosing words are simply the ability to explain the word in known terms and that the word chosen must be useful and meaningful to the students.

Some teachers are comfortable developing word lists for selected text; others like to use a purchased vocabulary program. Regardless of how the words are selected, it is important for students to develop their vocabularies in order to enhance comprehension, become mature writers, and convey their thoughts and ideas orally. In short, your best judgment, based on the knowledge you have of your students and their reading habits, is your greatest ally in selecting the appropriate vocabulary at the right time.

Learning words in context provides one important strategy for trade books and basal literature selections. Quite often, the words learned in context will lead to exploring related words that also would be beneficial for students to learn. Literature texts often recommend certain key, unfamiliar words that the student will encounter in the reading selections. These words should be introduced and pre-taught when instruction begins on the story. You also can draw on your own experiences to develop lists of unfamiliar words that determine the tone or mood of the story or that describe characters or settings.

Encouraging students to self-select vocabulary words is another useful strategy. Provide opportunities for students to learn unfamiliar or interesting words that they encounter in their reading. Setting up a box in which students deposit a slip of paper that lists an unfamiliar word is one easy and effective way to build a word bank. The slip should include the title of the book and the sentence in which the word is found. You can then compile the words and use them in a game or activity.

How Many Words to Teach

Just as there is no single way to choose words, there also is no “right number” of words to introduce to students at one time. It all boils down to how well you know your students. A list of five to ten words for elementary students and ten to twenty words for middle-level and high-school students each week is not excessive.

In many cases, not all words on a given vocabulary list are unfamiliar to all students. Many students will be able to make connections to words that appear on the list. Once new words are introduced, constant repetition is necessary. Words should not be introduced, tested, and then never returned to.

Once new words are introduced, students must be encouraged to use these words as often as possible. When they are encountered in print, the words should be noted and shared. The learning circle is closed when students recognize and discuss words in print that they had been introduced to in class.

What the Book Includes

Active Word Play gives you thirty-one games and activities that engage students in grades four and up to add new words to their vocabularies. The games and activities are presented in alphabetical order, with a cross-index in the back of the book that matches them with the skills they develop. A description and directions are given for each game, and templates and illustrations are provided wherever appropriate. Lists of common prefixes, suffixes, and root words, as well as ready-to-use prefix, suffix, and root-word cards, provided to help you play the card games presented in *Active Word Play*, are all found in the back of the book.

The games and activities in *Active Word Play* will help your students learn words in context and use them in new ways. Students will be given the opportunity to manipulate morphemes (prefixes, suffixes, and roots); play with synonyms, antonyms, and definitions; and painlessly learn about compound words and words with multiple meanings.

Once students find a strategy that works best for them, encourage them to implement this strategy as they continue to learn new vocabulary. As they actively engage with their new words, they will be making them their own. And, best of all, they will have a good time as they learn.

I hope you enjoy the games and activities in *Active Word Play*. I wish you happy, active word work!