5 Simple Steps for Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Dr. Kimberly Tyson

We know that there is a strong relationship between vocabulary, reading comprehension, and high student achievement. Systematic vocabulary instruction is an integral part of a K-12 comprehensive literacy framework for instruction.

Further, word learning is connected at the hip to teaching content at any level. Whether you teach kindergarten or high school students, having a strategic plan for teaching vocabulary should be at the top of your “must-do” list.

So, vocabulary instruction is important. Seems simple enough, doesn’t it? Unfortunately, there remains a gap between implementing effective vocabulary instruction and what often takes place in the classroom. I frequently see teachers (and administrators) struggle with the nuts and bolts of vocabulary instruction. Selecting words, choosing effective instructional strategies, and tying in digital tools – it’s a lot to tackle, isn’t it?

These 5 simple steps will make selecting and teaching vocabulary easier than you might think.

**STEP 1** | Know the key characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction.

Understanding the key characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction is important for K-12 educators. Why? Because they serve as the foundation for selecting instructional strategies and digital tools to support word learning.

“Top 10” Characteristics of Effective Vocabulary Instruction include:

1. **Multiple Exposures:** Word learning is shaped through multiple exposures in varied contexts. (Probably THE MOST important idea when it comes to learning new words.
2. **Frontload Key Vocabulary:** Before reading text or learning new content, introduce key vocabulary that is critical to understanding. Elicit background knowledge, create conversation and connections, and display or point out the words so that students will recognize them.
3. **Nonlinguistic Representations:** When learning new vocabulary, have students create pictographs, mental images, and pantomime word meanings in order to increase the likelihood of remembering new words.

*Check out 7 more key characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction here.*

**STEP 2** | Identify and sort key vocabulary into 3 Tiers.

Tiered vocabulary, put simply, is an organizational framework for categorizing words. The Common Core State Standards use the 3-tier vocabulary framework for sorting academic vocabulary. Understanding tiered vocabulary has practical applications for implementing the Common Core and classroom instruction.

**The Three Vocabulary Tiers**

**Tier 1: Common, Known Words**

**Examples:** big, small, house, table, family

In other words, Tier I words are basic, everyday words found frequently in conversation and are part of most children’s vocabulary.

**Tier 2: High-Frequency Words or Cross-Curricular Vocabulary**
Examples: justify, explain, expand, predict, summarize, maintain

Tier 2 words are made up of are general academic words and have utility across a wide range of topics. Another way to think of Tier 2 vocabulary is as cross-curricular terms. For example, the term “justify” and “predict” frequently appear in Science, Social Studies, and English texts. It is important to keep in mind that Tier 2 words are learned primarily through reading and explicit instruction and are key to building a strong academic vocabulary.

Tier 3: Low-Frequency, Domain-Specific words

Examples: isotope, tectonic plates, carcinogens, mitosis, lithosphere

Tier 3 words are domain specific vocabulary. Words in this category are low-frequency, specialized words that appear in specific fields or content areas. We anticipate that students will be unfamiliar with Tier 3 words. Beck suggests teaching these words as the need arises for comprehension in specific content areas.

The more you understand and sort vocabulary into the Tier 2 and Tier 3 words, the more instructional implications you’ll find. For example, the tiers will help you create content vocabulary lists. In addition, they’ll provide a focus for instruction and specific words to focus on during instruction.

Want to learn more? Find a more detailed explanation of the three tiers and instructional implications in “No Tears for Tiers: The Common Core Tiered Vocabulary Made Simple”. And, an eBook coming soon… No Tears for Tiers: Strategies & Tools for Implementing the Common Core Tiered Vocabulary

STEP 3 | Create a print-rich environment.

Many teachers and principals tell me they believe vocabulary and word learning are key to supporting student’s academic growth. I don’t doubt their sincerity; however, when many classrooms are void of word walls, classroom libraries, posters, and newspapers, I can’t help but believe they’ve missed a great opportunity for supporting vocabulary growth.

You see, a print-rich environment is not only important for early literacy development but supports word learning as well. Students not only learn words through direct instruction, but also develop their knowledge and exposure to new words indirectly through independent reading, word walls, and exposure to print across the school day.

Key elements of a literacy-rich environment include:

- classroom libraries that include a variety of genres and text types,
- content posters,
- anchor charts – teacher-made and co-created with students,
- word walls,
- labels,
- literacy workstations,
- writing centers,
- computers,
- display of student work,
- displays of books & information,
- bulletin boards, and
- plenty of opportunity to read, write, listen, and speak.

You can learn more by downloading the infographic featuring the “Top 10 Characteristics of a Literacy-Rich Environment.”
Building a toolbox of effective instructional strategies is essential for creating a language-rich environment that fosters and supports word learning for every student. Many strategies are highlighted in journals and across the web. The best vocabulary strategies engage students in learning words through a variety of strategies that include personalization, visualizing and creating other nonlinguistic representations, identifying synonyms and antonyms, verbalizing, writing in notebooks and journals, and playing with words through game-like activities.

Previously on this blog, I’ve highlighted and summarized numerous evidence-based vocabulary strategies. Most posts include downloadable templates to support your instructional efforts.

### Vocabulary Strategies

**Marzano’s 6-Step Vocabulary Process** – Developed by Bob Marzano, the “6-Step Process” is a must-know strategy for building academic vocabulary. Multiple exposures are at the heart of the process. (includes a downloadable PDF of the 6-Steps)

**Alphaboxes** – a strategy for activating prior knowledge, building vocabulary and comprehension before, during, and after reading. (includes template)

**Concept Circles** – a visual organizer that categorizes words related to a concept or topic. This simple tool helps students analyze connections between words and to explain relationships among words and the topic. (includes template)

**Anchored Word Learning** – a strategy that uses the power of read alouds to introduce and help students learn targeted, Tier 2 words within context (includes downloadable infographic)

**Save the Last Word for Me** – a great review strategy that works particularly well to support essential content area terminology.

**Word Walls that Rock** – Word walls belong in every K-12 classroom. In this post, I’ve included 26 ideas for words walls that go beyond an alphabetic display of words. You’ll find pictures and examples of word walls to support guided reading, content area instruction, writing, and more. (downloadable article)

There are many more vocabulary strategies that are important to include in a vocabulary toolbox. One of our most popular workshops, “Top Ten Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary in the Classroom and Out” includes many more vocabulary strategies that teachers can use tomorrow to help students acquire a rich, diverse vocabulary.

Digital tools have proven quite promising to support word learning. Compared to their more traditional counterparts, online tools provide a broader array of information about words and word meanings. In addition, some tools allow teachers to easily customize words so that students can practice, review, and play games with content or unit-specific words.

Digital tools allows students to:

- hear pronunciations
- read words in a variety of authentic examples
- view photos and images related to words
- reinforce word learning through interactive games
- play with and manipulate language
- discover rhyming words, and
- collaborate with classmates to create virtual words walls.
I’ve previously reviewed “21 Digital Tools to Support Word Learning” which has become a “most-read” post. The online tools are grouped into 4 categories: reference tools, word clouds, games and review, and word walls and virtual field trips. Review these tools and select a few that best support your instructional goals.

Final Thoughts

Five simple steps. Don’t make vocabulary instruction more overwhelming than it needs to be.

Start simply by getting familiar with the key characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction (Step 1). Then, identify core vocabulary and sort words into Tier 2 and Tier 3 academic vocabulary (Step 2). Don’t forget to have fun creating a print-rich environment that supports word learning (Step 3). Finally, identify and master several evidence-based instructional strategies (Step 4), and choose a few digital tools to provide support and practice for students (Step 5).

I’ve found that when teachers become intentional in their vocabulary instruction, they become excited about word learning and regularly identify, instruct, and have conversations around words with their students.

The best part is that teachers soon begin to observe measurable growth in their students.

{5 Steps Series}

● 5 Easy Steps to Rockin’ Word Walls
● 5 Key Steps to Improve Literacy in Schools and Districts
● 5 Quick Steps to Organize Your Classroom Library
● 5 Key Steps to Support Better Professional Learning
● 5 Simple Steps to Get Students to Read (a lot) More