

# Vocabulary at the Core

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# Introduction

What if you didn't know the meaning of any of the words on this page? Half of them? One-quarter of them? Vocabulary is obviously a core skill for reading. But there is even more to this picture: vocabulary is the way we acquire, and then access, new knowledge. And it is via vocabulary that we pass it on to others!

Vocabulary is not only the stuff of language – it is, arguably, the stuff of thought itself. Without adequate vocabulary, our students, especially those whose background knowledge does not coincide with what they need to know in school, cannot hope to succeed. And although teaching vocabulary is assumed to take place primarily in the English classroom, vocabulary is, in fact, a core skill for *all* classes as we prepare our students for higher education and the professional world.

What does the phrase “teaching vocabulary” evoke in your mind? We're guessing that you picture lists, dictionaries, homework assignments, sentences, fill-in-the-blank tests. Such trappings are all in service to the academic tradition called “teaching vocabulary”. Teachers, especially English teachers, are expected – by students, by parents, by administrators, by boards of education – to preside over lists of academic-sounding words that are called, redundantly enough, “vocabulary words”. The very expression “vocabulary words” should have long ago given us some insight that something is amiss: traditionally, we behave as if the words that we would like our students to learn are somehow set apart from their vocabulary, as though these are a set of words that live outside the collection of words that we expect them to use to communicate, to access concepts, to facilitate thought, to make sense of the world. In fact, that's pretty much what happens, or what fails to happen, as a result of our traditional vocabulary “program”.

I (Amy) remember, with a mixture of amusement and frustration, “helping” my son Mitchell study for one of the weekly vocabulary tests regularly given throughout his F-12 education. He was probably in the later middle years or early years of high school when the scene that I have in my head played out. Now, Mitchell, like most teenagers, was not inclined to ask Mum for help with his schoolwork. But I, as an English teacher, was eager to offer what I thought should be a welcome helping hand. In any case, I was to be given the privilege of playing Mum the Vocabulary Helper only under certain constraints.

“Just ask me the words,” Mitchell said evenly. “In order.”

The first of the words was ... I don't know ... let's say it was the word “abet”, meaning “to assist in a nefarious endeavour”. I'd try to bring forth his

background knowledge: “Did you ever hear the expression ‘to aid and abet’? Like, you know, to be an accomplice to a crime? Do you know what an accomplice is?”

And he’d make a face. “Mum, just ask me the word. I don’t have time for stories. I don’t need to know any stories about the words. Just the definitions. C’mon. Ask me them in order. You’ll see I know them.”

So he would recite the definitions just as they appeared on his worksheet. If he didn’t understand the words in the definitions, that was no matter because the teacher had promised not to pull any fast ones by changing the canned definitions on the Friday test. If he didn’t know how the word fit into his schema, how it morphed into its various forms, how its connotation differed from its denotation, its synonyms, antonyms, nuances, that was none of his concern. I played along, grateful, in my motherly way, for the chance to spend a bit of quality time with this teenager who appeared to be needing me less and less as he relentlessly grew up.

When Mitchell came home from school after that particular test, on a Friday (of course), I asked him how he thought he had done. “It was easy,” he said. And when he got his mark of 100 per cent, or close to it, he was vindicated. “I told you I knew how to study.”

I don’t think that my son is too much different from the way my own students were in the early years of my teaching career when I used commercial vocabulary programs. As a young teacher, I didn’t feel confident enough to step out from the paradigm: give the students a list of “vocabulary words”. The list often consisted of words plucked from assigned literature because, so it went, how can they comprehend *The Raven* unless they look up every word in it that they don’t know? Often, the list was a weekly parade of unrelated words set forth in a workbook. It was a convenient, well-organised system, with students being introduced to this week’s hit parade on Monday and then doing fill-in exercises for homework during the week. We’d visit the words at one or two points in the subsequent days of the week, perhaps “going over” the homework or grabbing a few minutes here and there to romance a matching column or “using them in a sentence”. And on Friday, the test. Every few weeks, there’d be a “cumulative test”.

That’s how it went and no one complained. The students did well, just as Mitchell had done well, on the commercially prepared tests. They and their parents were happy. Their vocabulary marks tended to “pull up” their composition and reading comprehension marks, and the words that they “learned” were certainly outside the scope of their conversational vocabulary. Why would anyone seek to improve or change such a time-honoured, well-controlled system? Who could find fault with it?

Well, as you might imagine, we do. We do find fault, and plenty of it, with the vocabulary pedagogy described above. As you’ve probably noticed, traditional

vocabulary instruction leads to rote memorisation but not true vocabulary growth. True vocabulary growth – where students *understand and use* the words that they've learned – requires two experiences that traditional workbook-like vocabulary instruction does not provide. These two experiences are (a) extensive processing of the word's meaning and use and (b) generous opportunities to use new words for meaningful communication. Add to this recipe the teacher's understanding about natural language acquisition, and you will have students whose vocabulary actually grows, rather than students who have memorised a bunch of words for a test, only to forget them as soon as the test is over.

We wrote this book to help teachers integrate vocabulary instruction with English so that students could not only expand the scope of their vocabulary, but could develop their skills as lifelong learners of words and indulge their own innate joy about language. We believe that vocabulary learning needs to be both robust and gradual: by robust, we mean that vocabulary should have a much bigger place in English lessons than just the weekly word list, and the learning of one word should lead to deeper understandings of related words. By gradual, we mean that the full meaning of a word, especially a complex word, should cover more territory than a sterile definition can convey. For many interesting words, meaning is gradually revealed through repeated exposure in various contexts. We also believe that words, once learned, need to stay learned. That means that our vocabulary instruction must be cumulative and recursive: we need to nurture new words by using them ourselves and by setting up learning experiences that will have students using new words, revisiting not-so-new ones.

This is an expanded and extended version of our book *Vocabulary at the Center* (2009). The chapters of this book fully develop the robust, gradual, cumulative and recursive approach that we advocate. Each chapter is a combination of brain-based background/theoretical discussion and specific classroom applications that allow you to incorporate the concepts directly into your lesson plans. A chapter-by-chapter breakdown is given in the following **User's Guide**.



# User's Guide

Chapter 1 gives you a deep look into what word knowledge is all about. You'll find that words learned in context reveal more and more about themselves each time they appear in a different sentence. And you'll find that a word's meaning is elastic, changeable, subtle, nuanced and variable. There's more to knowing a word than the ability to parrot back a single, rigid definition when asked to do so on a test. You'll also realise that using a word in a sentence (meaningfully) requires a significant amount of knowledge. We don't just jump from being able to tell a definition to being able to use a word productively. There's a continuum of knowledge from Point A to Point B.

Chapter 2 may help you change your mind about the words – both the kinds of words and the amount – that you should be explicitly teaching. We make the case for relying heavily on a list that we're calling *Generic Academic Vocabulary* (GAV). You'll learn all about it in Chapter 2, plus various classroom activities that will allow students to process the words through meaningful use and analysis.

Chapter 3 explains the important difference between words we know because we've heard or read them and words we know because we've actually used them. The first category is called our *receptive* vocabulary; the second, our *productive* vocabulary. This chapter provides applications that will move the words along the continuum from total unfamiliarity, to receptive recognition, to productive use.

In Chapter 4 we talk about the instructional implications of how the brain learns best. When we compare the ways in which brains learn best to the ways in which many classrooms and schools operate, we often find a gap. Practices such as worksheets that are done in silence, lists of unconnected words out of context and memorisation that is unconnected to meaning are a few of the outdated practices that don't comport with the way brains like to soak up information.

Continuing within the landscape of the brain, we talk about word storage in Chapter 5. We explain how the brain operates like a file system that has all kinds of interrelated access points through which words may be retrieved.

Chapter 6 explains how words are learned and remembered through deep processing. In practical terms, that means that we need various engagements with new words, engagements that allow those new words to really make themselves at home in the brain's schema. We take you through a detailed analysis of many traditional vocabulary activities/assessments in terms of their depth

of processing and the likelihood that they would result in durable learning. We also match depth of processing activities to Bloom's taxonomy.

Chapter 7 delves into the whole idea of guessing from context. We make the point that not all contexts are alike. Some sentences and surrounding text are much more revealing than others. Certain kinds of key words and punctuation need to be read as context clues.

The last chapter, Chapter 8, addresses assessment in a way that takes the subtleties of vocabulary learning into account. As we say throughout the book, we'd like to move you beyond traditional assessments that usually are capable only of a superficial reading of the extent to which a student knows a word.

The Appendices contain the following parts:

- ◆ Appendix A: a list of vocabulary commonly found in academic texts.
- ◆ Appendix B: a table of common Latin and Greek word components.
- ◆ Appendix C & D: tasks to demonstrate the difference in retention between tasks that require shallow processing and tasks that require deep processing.
- ◆ Appendix E: a list of phrasal verbs and Latinate counterparts that sound more mature, more sophisticated.
- ◆ Appendix F: an example of an extended vocabulary activity that will enhance retention.
- ◆ Appendix G: anchor activities for effective vocabulary instruction.
- ◆ Appendix H: an explanation of frequency of occurrence lists and how they can be used.