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Introduction

How to Teach Academic Vocabulary So Kids Will Remember

“The aim [of education] must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals who, however, see in the service to the community their highest life achievement.”

– Albert Einstein

There are a few things that I’ve learnt about education and educators over the years, and I want to share some of them with you before I give you any ideas on teaching vocabulary. Understanding my philosophy of life and education will provide you with the prior knowledge you need to understand my thinking. So, here’s what I think:

- Anyone who has been an educator for ten years or more realises that education is cyclical. What goes around generally comes back around (but often with a new name which schools then use as new initiatives).
- Teaching at any level is always a work in progress, and teachers should remember that learning to teach is a gradual process. The concerns and problems we face as teachers change as we gain more experience in the classroom.
- During the beginning years as classroom teachers, our attention tends to be focused on survival. How to maintain discipline, motivate students, evaluate student work and deal with parents are universal concerns as we begin our teaching careers.
- As we gain experience, we begin to become more concerned about our own professional growth and our effectiveness with a diverse population of students. We finally realise that becoming a good teacher means being a good learner.
- All teachers want to know how to maximise their teaching effectiveness.

In today's world, society and young people are changing so rapidly that it is critical to understand what our students are facing in order to determine appropriate instructional strategies. Today's students have grown up using technology in ways that many adults cannot even imagine. They have grown up with society and school violence. This new generation of learners demands a rejuvenation of teachers and perhaps a shift in the way we teach. These changes do not mean that we eliminate all the strategies that we have traditionally found effective. It simply means that we take a close look at what works for the growing diversity among kids. This change may mean reviving some of the traditional teaching approaches (we know what good teaching and learning look like); or in some cases, it may mean that we will have to stop using teaching strategies that aren't effective with students. As a very perceptive person once said, "When the horse dies, get off". Perhaps it is time for us to evaluate our current "horses" and see if any of them have died!

As teachers (especially for me as an English teacher), we have seen students who performed well on vocabulary tests one week and then two weeks (or two hours) later didn't even recognise the words in another context, let alone remember what they meant. No wonder so many of us get disappointed with the results of standardised tests when we have worked so hard and truly believed that our students had learnt and understood the vocabulary we taught them. Unfortunately, many of our students are doing exactly what many of us did to get through school (if we will admit it); they are memorising the words and definitions, putting them down on our tests to get a good mark or please the teacher and then promptly forgetting them! The kids are making no connections to the words or even realising how the words relate to learning in our content areas.

We cannot possibly teach every word that students don't know and understand in our classes, but we can and must teach our students ways to know and understand the critical vocabulary they need to be successful in school, ways to discover the meaning of any words they don't know and ways to put that learning into long-term memory!

In *How To Teach Reading When You're Not a Reading Teacher* I examined ways that teachers could address the literacy needs of their students even if they didn't have a background in reading. I presented reading strategies that could be used in all content areas and at all year levels, even though I focused on the middle years. In this book, I will elaborate only on vocabulary strategies because it has become apparent from research, daily practice and standardised

tests that if students do not know the “essential vocabulary” of the subjects they must take, they will not be successful in school or be able to show what they know and are able to do on standardised tests.

How to Teach Academic Vocabulary is intended to outline easy-to-use and practical vocabulary strategies for teachers who want to increase the academic achievement of all their students. I will begin with the research from best practice, literacy and brain-based learning. I know that many educators often say, “Don’t give me the research. Just tell me what to do in my classes.” This always makes me sad because I believe that educators must be knowledgeable about why we do what we do. How else can we explain our teaching to a society that questions the quality of our work? If we don’t know the research, how can we teach our students the best ways for them to know and remember things? With this idea in mind, I have strived to keep the research succinct and interesting. It is there for those of you who want to be consciously competent in your teaching and able to explain why you do what you do.

Good teachers often make their content come alive for students even if students can’t read the text, but over the years I have come to believe that we are doing them a great disservice with this approach. If we value the content we are teaching (and we all love our own content), then we must give our students the strategies and skills they need to be self-sufficient learners when we’re not there to provide information. We must help our students learn to value the content we love and we must give them a variety of ways to be successful without us.

This book is a compilation of the ideas and strategies collected from many sources and colleagues I have worked with over the years. I thank all of them for giving me valuable ideas that I could “borrow straight” or “borrow and adjust”. Since there is no one “best way” to teach vocabulary (or anything else), tailor these techniques to your curriculum, your students and your teaching style. Take the ones you like and make them work for you!

Sharon Falker

What Do You Know About Effective Vocabulary Instruction?

Here is a list of 15 vocabulary instructional strategies. Based on your prior knowledge about teaching vocabulary, decide if each one is **effective** (E) or **ineffective** (I) as a way to enhance long-term memory and increase students' vocabulary in your content area. This is a pre-assessment, so mark each one even if you are not certain of the answer. By the time you finish this book, you will know the correct answers. Some of them may surprise you!

- 1. Learning vocabulary words out of context or in isolation
- 2. Programmed vocabulary books or computer software
- 3. Reading every day in every learning area
- 4. Playing and having fun with new words
- 5. Using new vocabulary only when it is in the day's lesson
- 6. Discussing antonyms and synonyms for new vocabulary
- 7. Looking up definitions in a dictionary or glossary and writing a sentence using the new word
- 8. Integrating new vocabulary into everyday language – reading, writing and speaking
- 9. Drill and practice involving multiple repetitions of the same type
- 10. Teacher reading aloud when text is too difficult for students to read themselves or using an audiotape of the text
- 11. Memorising definitions
- 12. Using graphic organisers or visuals to support new words – pictures, diagrams, charts
- 13. Providing activities that integrate, repeat and have meaningful use of new vocabulary words
- 14. Explicit and systematic instruction of new vocabulary
- 15. Multiple exposures to words in context

Why Do We Need to Know the Research?

As a consultant, I work with teachers and administrators all the time. It never fails to amaze me that I still get comments like, “Why do we need to look at research? Can’t you just tell us what to do in our classes?” One of the problems educators face in today’s society is the inability of many of us to explain why we do what we do. In a society where we are questioned about everything we do, and anyone who has been to school thinks they know how we should teach and run schools, this inability becomes a liability. So, here is my list of reasons why educators need to know and understand the current research:

1. Research informs and confirms for educators what works best to help students learn and what instructional strategies teachers can use to help students.
2. Educators are *professionals*, as are doctors, dentists, accountants and lawyers.

Would you go to one of them who hadn’t kept up on the latest research in their fields? If your answer is no, then why should we expect parents to trust us if we’re still doing what we’ve always been doing just because that’s the way we do it?

3. Educators need to be consciously competent and should be able to explain what they do and why they do it. Some teachers are unconsciously competent and do things that work without realising exactly why they work or specifically what they have done. Learning does not happen by accident, and we should be able to explain why we do what we do in terms that lay people can understand.

This is why many folks don’t like research – it is usually written in a way that no one but researchers can understand!

4. Students in all classes deserve teachers who know how to best help them learn in an explicit and systematic way that will help them achieve to their best abilities.

5. If teachers know and understand the literacy, best practice and brain research, it is never too late to help a student learn to read in any content!

If you don’t believe this part, then we might as well close up shop when students get to Year 4 and beyond and can’t do reading or maths at the level that we expect.

Now that you know my philosophy about our need to be informed professionals and have completed your pre-assessment, let's look at what the research tells us about vocabulary instruction.

What Does the Research Say and What Does That Mean?

Teachers know that there are student factors outside of school, like home life and childhood experiences, that have a big influence on student success in school. We also know that we can't change those factors, but they do make the "playing field" at school uneven. Students from disadvantaged homes come to school lacking in background knowledge about life and school as well as the specific vocabulary needed to be successful in a school setting. They've had many types of experiences and know many words, but they are most likely not the experiences or words that will make them successful at school. Some kids come to school *reading ready*, and others don't even know to hold their books right side up or that their eyes go left to right across the page when they read. Some kids have been on holidays and have parents that read to them, and still other kids have never been outside their own communities. Without background knowledge and vocabulary, many students have problems with reading comprehension, writing and communicating in their content specific classes. Classes like history, science, career and technical education courses, and even reading and English use unfamiliar words that many students cannot understand; and if students can't understand the words, they can't comprehend when they read.

We often expect our students to know the words they need to be successful in our classes because they have been exposed to them in previous years. In fact, if you examine the verbs in your curriculum content descriptions by year level, you will see that many of the verbs are exactly the same year after year for what we want students to know and be able to do. Why is it then that many students move right up the years and never understand what it means to compare and contrast, infer or summarise? Unfortunately, too many of our students have "word poverty", and this lack of academic vocabulary will widen the gap that exists between successful and unsuccessful students in today's educational environment. We must equip our students to be successful in academic contexts. Lack of vocabulary knowledge is a serious obstacle for many of our students, affecting not only their reading, but also their writing and communicating. One of the primary responsibilities of teachers at all levels is to provide opportunities for students to enlarge their listening, speaking, reading and writing vocabularies.