

JANET ALLEN

INSIDE WORDS

TOOLS FOR TEACHING
ACADEMIC VOCABULARY
GRADES 4–12



CONTENTS

<i>Instructional Strategies and the Tools That Support Them</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
CONCEPT CIRCLES	13
CONCEPT LADDER	19
CONCEPTS AND VOCABULARY: CATEGORIES AND LABELS	25
CONTEXTUAL REDEFINITION	31
DICTOGLOS	35
FOCUSED CLOZE	39
FRAYER MODEL	43
FREQUENT CONTACT	49

“I’M THINKING OF A WORD . . .”	55
I SPY: A WORD SCAVENGER HUNT	59
LEAD	63
LIST-GROUP-LABEL	69
POSSIBLE QUESTIONS	75
POSSIBLE SENTENCES	81
PREVIEWING CONTENT VOCABULARY	87
SEMANTIC FEATURE ANALYSIS	91
SEMANTIC MAPPING	97
SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST	101
THINK-PAIR-SHARE: COLLABORATE FOR UNDERSTANDING	105
VOCAB-O-GRAM	109
WORD SORT	115
WORD WALLS	119

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INTRODUCTION

One must be drenched in words, literally soaked in them, to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment.

—Hart Crane

Why another book on teaching vocabulary? I have pondered that question several times in the course of writing this book. When I wrote *Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4–12* in 1999, I began the first chapter with a quote from Baumann and Kame’enui: “We know too much to say we know too little, and we know too little to say

that we know enough. Indeed language is difficult to put into words” (1991, 604). Since I wrote that book eight years ago, there have been many books and research studies highlighting the role of effective vocabulary instruction in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Yet, as I work in schools and classrooms across the country, I continue to see teachers and students struggling to find ways to make content vocabulary accessible and meaningful. The research is there but the classroom application for that research is still in its infancy.

In 2004, I wrote *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy* in order to help teachers implement effective literacy instruction in the schools where I was part of their professional development. It was designed so teachers could take research on effective strategies and see models for what that research might look like in their classrooms. I highlighted the original researchers and explained the strategies. I then showed examples of those strategies as they were used in a variety of content classrooms. I focused less on vocabulary than on other instructional strategies because *Words, Words, Words* was available and the vocabulary instruction I wrote about in that book was applicable to all content areas.

Since the publication of *Words, Words, Words*, I have become increasingly aware of how significant vocabulary instruction is in content classrooms. Students seldom bring background knowledge that will help them successfully negotiate their content reading. In *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement: Research on What Works in Schools* (2004), Marzano makes a case for increasing building background knowledge by increasing the emphasis on vocabulary instruction: “the research and theory strongly suggest that teaching vocabulary is synonymous with teaching background knowledge. The packets of information that constitute our background knowledge all have labels associated with them” (35). As I studied this research, I was struck by the exponential impact of teaching students academic vocabulary as a way to increase word knowledge and background knowledge. Learners would not only know more about the content, but they would also know the language used inside the content.

Inside Words combines current research on effective vocabulary instruction similar to the research highlighted in *Words, Words,*

Words with effective instructional strategies similar to those highlighted in *Tools for Teaching Content Literacy*. It also joins the two formats: I blended the quick overview format from *Tools* with several classrooms examples, as I did in *Words*. Baumann and Kame'enui's words are indeed true: "We know too much to say we know too little." Although we still may not know *all* we need to know about vocabulary instruction, we do know a great deal about what effective vocabulary instruction could look like in content classrooms. It is my hope that this book will help support your effective classroom instruction with vocabulary research and instructional strategies.

Why Teach Vocabulary?

Most educators believe that vocabulary instruction is critical in any classroom. The issue is not whether we should have vocabulary instruction, but how to make that vocabulary instruction have meaning beyond assigned word lists. Most of us have struggled and continue to puzzle over how to teach vocabulary in meaningful and memorable ways so our students have access to the words in their reading, writing, and thinking. In *Building Academic Vocabulary Teacher's Manual*, Marzano and Pickering highlight the connection between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of content:

People's knowledge of any topic is encapsulated in the terms they know that are relevant to the topic. The more students understand these terms, the easier it is for them to understand information they may read or hear about the topic. The more terms a person knows about a given subject, the easier it is to understand—and learn—new information related to that subject. (2005, 2–3)

The why of vocabulary instruction is easily answered: in the absence of a repertoire of effective instructional strategies for teaching those words that are critical to students' understanding of a variety of texts, they will

continue to struggle in their content classes. It is a cycle all too familiar to most of us.

At one time or another, we have all complained that our students can't or won't read their text assignments. Regardless of how aesthetically appealing publishers make content textbooks, the fact remains that most students bring little background knowledge of or interest in the concepts and related vocabulary they will encounter in their assigned reading. Relevant research findings are listed in the chart that follows. One important finding is research that understanding some content vocabulary is critical to comprehending a text. Moore, Readence, and Rickelman build on Readence, Bean, and Baldwin's (1985) position that students need to become *insiders* in their interaction with content reading:

Outsiders are restricted in their communication with a group because they cannot use the group's special vocabulary and the concepts inherent in that terminology. Insiders use special vocabulary freely to communicate with the collective members of a group. (Moore, Readance, and Rickelman 1989, 36)

In an effort to help students gain this *insider* position in relation to content reading and writing, teachers often choose the most challenging words for preteaching. In spite of that practice, many students are still unable (or unwilling) to read their texts and do not use the content terminology in their writing and speaking.

Students agree with teachers that content vocabulary is a roadblock to learning content. When questioned about reading their textbook assignments, students reported that one of the greatest challenges in reading these texts or completing writing assignments in content classes is that they don't know the vocabulary words. In research studies I've conducted, students always report that the difficulty of the vocabulary makes reading their textbooks impossible. On a recent survey, I asked students how these challenging words were taught in their classes; the most frequent response was that they were given a list of words when they started a new chapter in the textbook. They were asked to copy the words and find a definition for each word from the dictionary or textbook glossary

and then use the target words in a sentence. Not surprisingly, students reported remembering or really knowing few of these words. So, how can we overcome this ongoing dilemma?

How Do We Describe Effective Vocabulary Instruction?

When I was in my own classroom, I used to say that I wasn't sure how to define effective vocabulary instruction but I sure knew what it looked like when it was happening. On those days when effective vocabulary instruction was occurring, the joy students experienced in seeing a word they knew in a new context, or being able to use interesting and specialized vocabulary in their writing, was palpable in our classroom. On other days, every aspect of vocabulary instruction was a challenge.

In Beck, McKeown and Kucan's book, *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, the authors highlight characteristics of robust vocabulary instruction. Instruction that meets their definition of robust provides the following:

- Rich information about words and their uses;
- Frequent and varied opportunities for students to think about and use words; and,
- Enhanced student language comprehension and production. (2002, 2)

After reading the authors' definition of robust instruction, I began gathering tools for content teachers to use with their students in order to make the concepts and vocabulary meaningful, memorable, and useful. When these tools are used appropriately by matching the instructional strategy with the goal, teachers discover that not only does comprehension increase, but also academic writing is more precise, logical, and interesting.

How Inside Words Is Organized

After describing and illustrating the strategies in this book, I was left with the decision of how to organize them to be helpful and easily accessible to educators. My first thought was to use traditional categories of pre-, during, and post-reading; however, as I tried to categorize, I kept encountering the same dilemma: instructional strategies such as LEAD are effective pre-reading strategies, but they also support comprehension and provide a structure for students to demonstrate understanding post-reading.

I then decided to organize the strategies based on components of a comprehensive vocabulary program as described in *Vocabulary Instruction: Research to Practice* (Baumann and Kame'enui 2004). In this research-based approach to effective classroom practices, the authors cite four components of comprehensive vocabulary instruction:

- fostering word consciousness;
- teaching individual words;
- teaching strategies for learning words independently; and,
- presenting frequent/extensive/varied opportunities for independent reading.

Once again, I was faced with a dilemma: the strategies all foster word consciousness and highlight individual words or concepts, and all employ diverse texts as a way to demonstrate words used in a meaningful context. I didn't want the organizational categories to limit the ways teachers might apply these tools, yet using either of these two systems could lead educators to see the strategies as single-purpose instructional tools.

I finally chose to organize them alphabetically so they could be easily found for teaching as well as for discussion in study groups or professional development. These are tools for teachers, and the purpose of a tool is to help get a job finished. So the strategies are in alphabetical order, and following the Table of Contents, there is a list that categorizes them into instructional strategies based on the ways I think they

help students learn and use academic and specialized vocabulary. These instructional strategies are the following:

- Builds background knowledge
- Teaches words that are critical to comprehension
- Provides support during reading and writing
- Develops conceptual framework for themes, topics, and units of study
- Assesses students' understanding of words and concepts

As you examine and use these teaching and learning tools in your classroom with your students, I hope you find that your robust instruction leads students to *insider* terminology—terminology that will help them think, talk, and write about their content knowledge so they can live and learn inside words.

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