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*Reproducibles are in italics.*

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# Introduction

Today's world seems to move at the speed of light, and schools are no exception. The academic expectations for students zoom higher, high-stakes and low-stakes testing consume precious instructional hours, and teachers are increasingly conflicted about exactly what to teach and how best to do so. Educational policies will continue to shift and change the K–12 landscape; however, the importance of vocabulary will remain constant. Vocabulary and word knowledge are essential, serving as the basic building blocks of language and impacting fluency, comprehension, and achievement.

## Vocabulary and Achievement in School and Beyond

First, to be clear, let's begin with a working definition of vocabulary. *Vocabulary*, in its simplest form, refers to the words we use to communicate effectively when we listen, speak, read, and write. Going a layer deeper, vocabulary is often divided into two broad categories that are useful for discussing words and word usage: receptive and expressive vocabulary. *Receptive vocabulary* refers to those words we understand when we listen and read, and *expressive vocabulary* refers to the words we use when speaking and writing. One's receptive vocabulary is much broader than one's expressive vocabulary. For example, a two-year-old child understands when his parent tells him that it's time to go outside to play, and since it's cold he'll need to bundle up in a coat, mittens, and a scarf. More than likely, the toddler will run to the closet and pull out his coat, mittens, and scarf even though he may not be able to verbalize this himself. Similarly, students understand many more specific words that you use within classroom discussions than they use when speaking and writing. Our overarching goal in vocabulary instruction is to help you move words in students' receptive banks to their expressive banks through direct instruction, indirect instruction, and the use of digital tools and games to review and practice with words. It's only through accurate use of new words that students add them to their personal lexicons.

A robust vocabulary helps students achieve success. Students must encounter new words in order to build their vocabulary and their knowledge of various concepts. Conceptual understanding, along with both general and specific word knowledge, impacts learning at

every level. In addition, when older students know the meaning of specific words and are able to put related words together during a unit of study, they can connect to new content more readily and remember more (Marzano & Simms, 2013). Conversely, students who are deficient in vocabulary face numerous obstacles. Their reading range is limited, their writing lacks specificity and voice, and their spoken language lacks range of word choice and may give others a negative or inaccurate first impression.

It is not only for the purpose of individual growth and achievement that we teachers need to address vocabulary learning more directly than we have in the past. Many educators are familiar with the various research studies that correlate low literacy with poverty, unemployment, and incarceration (Baer, Kutner, Sabatini, & White, 2009; Hart & Risley, 2003). While we certainly want each student we teach to reach his or her full potential, there is also a large-scale, societal benefit when students increase their literacy. Literate adults are more likely to be employed, so they contribute to the economy through expenditures and taxes. They are also more likely to be well educated, and this bodes well for their families, as well-educated parents provide social and material advantages to their children. During the Great Recession in the United States, those with higher levels of education fared best—an outcome tied to literacy success (Rampell, 2013). Well-honed literacy skills provide a cushion against many types of hardship in a person's life. Effective vocabulary instruction is an integral piece of the puzzle that can help the young people we see every day in our classrooms become literate for life.

## Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension

Vocabulary and its interconnected relationship with comprehension has been the focus of a great deal of research—both quantitative and qualitative—over many years. Decades of research reveal that vocabulary knowledge strongly correlates to reading comprehension. Landmark studies such as Frederick B. Davis's (1944, 1968) factor analysis and reanalysis by others (Sparritt, 1972; Thurstone, 1946) reveal that adults who have greater word knowledge and score high on vocabulary tests also score high on tests of reading comprehension. In other words, even though reading comprehension is a complex process, word knowledge plays the most important role.

Vocabulary and word knowledge also play an important role in comprehension for students. It is so critical to comprehension that the National Reading Panel (2000) includes vocabulary as one of the five essential components—or building blocks—of reading. Vocabulary and comprehension are so commingled that the National Reading Panel (2000) reports that separating them “is difficult, if not impossible” (p. 239).

Early vocabulary development is critical, and research shows that a lack of word knowledge has lingering effects. For example, kindergarten students' word knowledge predicts reading comprehension in second grade (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002). Similarly, other researchers (Wagner, Muse, & Tannenbaum, 2007) find the same predictive ability persists from kindergarten to fourth grade. Perhaps even more surprisingly, Anne Cunningham and Keith Stanovich (1997) find

that first-grade students' vocabulary knowledge predicts their reading comprehension level even later, in the eleventh grade.

Not only is vocabulary knowledge important for comprehension, it also relates to one's skills in writing. A student who reads frequently and possesses a large and varied vocabulary has many more words to choose from when writing. Although research on the connections between vocabulary and writing is sparse, one study shows that students who receive instruction in word consciousness use a greater number of rare words in their writing after instruction than before (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). The number of words a student knows greatly influences his or her verbal output, which is one of the first things other people, including teachers, notice. If you and your colleagues have discussed voice and word choice in writing with students, you likely know from experience that the best papers are the ones in which students use the most precise and specific words. These data all illustrate that students who enter school with deficient vocabulary knowledge seem to remain deficient.

## Vocabulary Gaps and Literacy

Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley (2003), in their study of the vocabulary growth of three-year-old children from low-income families compared with toddlers from middle-class and professional families, find a stark and persistent difference in vocabulary knowledge and word acquisition between these groups. Hart and Risley (1995) estimate that students from professional families have been exposed to thirty million more words by age three than their low-income counterparts.

Some may wonder how such a large gap exists. In varied home settings, children's language experience differs both in quality and number of words heard. For example, professional parents more routinely engage with their children, using a variety of more sophisticated words and a broader array of words than working-class and low-income parents (Hart & Risley, 1995). Hart and Risley (1995) note that children of professional families enter school with a vocabulary of about 1,100 words, whereas children of working-class families enter knowing about 700 words, and children of welfare families have only amassed about 500 words upon entering school. Simply put, young children's language and social interactions closely mirror those of their parents. Putting it another way, "to grow up as the child of well-educated parents in an affluent American home is to hit the verbal lottery" (Pondiscio, 2014).

Unfortunately, the vocabulary gap in preschool-age children often starts them off in a game of catch up and keep up that compounds as they learn to read and later when they encounter increasingly difficult academic content. A large oral vocabulary helps students as they begin learning to read. Students with larger vocabularies tend to become better readers, enjoy reading more, and read independently with more frequency than students with smaller vocabularies, who struggle as readers and dislike reading (Stahl, 1999). Whether you teach upper elementary, middle, or high school, we suspect you know far too well the moans and groans of some of your students when independent

reading time rolls around or textbook reading is required. Struggling readers actively seek to decrease their time and engagement with all sorts of text, trapping themselves in a world of simplistic vocabulary, limited content knowledge, and a distaste for reading for pleasure or information.

In addition, those students with broad vocabularies read more independently, which, in turn, exposes them further to words and additional vocabulary growth (Stanovich, 1986). Frequently referred to as the *Matthew effect* (Figurelli, 2015), reading volume makes a difference not only in terms of acquiring reading skills but also in deepening and broadening an individual's word knowledge (Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). And, of critical importance to learning, one's vocabulary knowledge directly relates to reading comprehension. To sum it up, the “rich get richer” (Stanovich, 1986, p. 380).

We know vocabulary and word knowledge gaps widen as students mature through the grades. Research supports the urgency we should feel to positively influence our students' understanding of a broad range of words. Given the importance of vocabulary, one would reason that schools would emphasize a comprehensive approach to vocabulary development—one that would shore up deficits and build students' word knowledge. Yet, historically, schools have not done so (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006). For as much as we know about the positive effects of equipping students with a wide vocabulary, well-meaning teachers typically provide little more than a cursory nod to word meanings and often simply mention synonyms when defining a word or refer students to the dictionary (Scott et al., 2003). Both of these methods are insufficient to build the vocabulary students need to become capable readers.

Therefore, we are proposing a blended vocabulary model that consists of several components: modeling, explicit instruction, and orchestration of incidental learning opportunities. Use of online tools and digital applications runs throughout all components. This model honors other models of vocabulary instruction, is grounded in research, and utilizes modern technologies.

## About This Book

In spite of decades of research on vocabulary and word learning, many of the practical aspects of that research have failed to trickle down to classroom instructional practice. As we've noted, persistent gaps in students' vocabulary knowledge affect their comprehension and therefore their overall academic achievement. We have seen the ways academic achievement, or lack thereof, further affects students' futures beyond the classroom. It's imperative that we address these gaps and deliver direct instruction to all students to expand their vocabulary acquisition and ensure their learning and future success. We seek to address these gaps within these pages. Our goal in writing this book is straightforward. Within this professional resource, we seek to provide K–12 educators with a research-based, practical guide to more clearly understand vocabulary learning and its important implications for classroom instruction.



Word learning occurs through many varied avenues—reading, discussion, listening, environmental print, games, and direct instruction, to name just a few. Today, technology offers new avenues for practice, review, and word learning, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts advocate using digital technology to support domain-specific literacy in secondary classrooms (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). This book seeks to inform and expand educator understanding around a blended learning framework that harnesses the power of digital tools to reinforce and expand effective, practical word learning in the classroom. We share instructional strategies for word learning for students of all ages and varying abilities. Integrating digital technology into instruction can help bridge the gap between students' out-of-school and in-school practices (Alvermann, 2008; Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003/2004). Note that not every strategy we share will be conducive to digital tool use, nor should it be. Curriculum standards, along with your instructional decisions, come first in the planning cycle. You can then select technology and digital tools to support specific standards and instructional goals. In other words, it's not about the technology but rather the teaching and learning that occur both inside and outside the classroom. We offer this simple yet meaningful model to help you better equip students for greater command over the power of words.

### *Intended Audience*

When we write and create resources, we think about those who will likely read the book or blog post or use the resources. While our primary audience is teachers and literacy leaders, other individuals may also benefit from the information about vocabulary learning within this book. Though these roles vary in respect to implementing standards and vocabulary, each is nonetheless important. Our overarching goal is to provide educators with greater understanding specific to selecting, teaching, and assessing vocabulary that will give them the knowledge they need to implement a school- or districtwide comprehensive vocabulary model. To do so requires involvement from all these individuals.

- **Teachers:** Those who directly teach students in K–12 classrooms will benefit from the straightforward definitions and practical examples; instructional implications; instructional strategies for elementary, secondary, and special populations; and resources found within this book and online. We've observed that teachers often have a difficult time integrating digital tools to support literacy instruction. However, as responsible teachers, we must prepare students to become literate in using digital technology to support their independent learning and ultimate success in higher education and the workplace. Throughout this book, we provide guidance for you on using digital tools for instruction as well as for professional development and collaboration.
- **Literacy leadership teams and collaborative teams:** This book supports in-depth study and conversation about best vocabulary practices. We've included next steps at the close of every chapter that you can use to support a book study and to help implement research-based, instructional practices. We'd be thrilled

to join you in a Twitter chat or other online forum should you choose to have an online book study.

- **Principals and district leaders:** This resource provides the nuts and bolts for you as building and district leaders to select, teach, and assess vocabulary across classrooms. Specific to your role, we also address how to build and sustain a culture of word learning, which we have found critical for sustainable implementation and success.
- **Instructional coaches:** This book is designed to support your efforts as the individual who trains and supports teachers. You can easily divide this resource into manageable chunks of content suitable for staff meetings, professional learning days, or meetings with grade-level teams or professional learning communities. Additionally, many of the blog posts we refer to throughout the book can serve as online resources providing additional examples, images, and resources.

### *What You Can Expect From This Book*

Vocabulary plays an undeniable role in the reading success of students. The NGA and the CCSSO's Common Core State Standards, along with many state and provincial standards, emphasize the role of vocabulary and word learning. Students who continually build a broad, enriched vocabulary become abler learners and achieve at higher levels than those who don't. As educators who support teachers, we firmly believe that learning more about effective vocabulary instruction and refining current practices deserve our attention. The chapters that follow provide information and strategies for implementing effective school- or districtwide vocabulary instruction.

In chapter 1, we begin by discussing the importance of establishing a culture of word learning and providing guidance for literacy leadership teams to begin this work in their schools and districts. Chapter 2 details our proposed blended vocabulary model for conducting intentional vocabulary instruction, outlining other valuable instructional models we have drawn from. We provide background information about tiered vocabulary words and suggestions for ways you can approach the task of choosing the vocabulary words teachers will teach in their classrooms in chapter 3. Chapter 4 then explains effective instructional and assessment methods to teach and evaluate students' vocabulary knowledge. Chapters 5 and 6 provide several specific strategies you may employ in elementary and secondary classrooms, respectively, to intentionally teach vocabulary, including direct and indirect instruction, review, and digital tools. Similarly, chapter 7 offers strategies that are appropriate to use with English learners (ELs) and students with disabilities. At the close of each chapter, we also feature a list of digital tools applicable to the chapter's content that you can integrate into your instructional activities and independent practice. In appendix A (page 107), we provide in-depth reviews of these digital tools. They show great promise to enrich your vocabulary instruction through practice and review, and deepen independent word learning. We specifically include this resource in the hope that you will find it helpful and to provide the background you need to begin integrating digital tools and apps that support word learning into your comprehensive approach to