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Introduction

Since the 1990s, teachers have begun to realize that “look it up in the dictionary” or “check the glossary” is not an appropriate response when students inquire about a word’s meaning. Thankfully, in most classrooms, the weekly lists of words to study for Friday quizzes have been replaced with vocabulary assignments that create better retention. Teachers know that their students need to learn and use more words than ever. Why have teachers come to this conclusion? Three factors have influenced most of the teachers with whom I work.

First, the increasing rate of children living in poverty means that students arrive in prekindergarten or kindergarten programs already displaying a vocabulary deficit. The *thirty-million-word gap*, as it is known, refers to the number of words that students in welfare-dependent families have heard spoken versus the number of words that students in professional families have heard spoken before they enter school (Hart & Risley, 2003). This gap, if not addressed, is compounded over time and becomes a serious impediment to reading comprehension. Studies show that kindergarten vocabulary knowledge accurately predicts second-grade reading comprehension (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002). Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich’s (1997) work shows a correlation between first-grade vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension in high school. Thus, boosting our economically disadvantaged students’ vocabulary is incredibly important because they have an early and huge disadvantage that impacts their achievement through their teenage years. (And, ethically, boosting every student’s vocabulary should be part of each school’s mission.)

Second, academic standards have increased in rigor, and they demand that students have large, general academic vocabularies in addition to advanced, discipline-specific vocabularies. The United States and other nations’ adopted standards have been crafted with attention to the workings of our global economy. It’s simply no longer possible for the masses in most countries to get a good factory or office job with attractive benefits and comfortable pensions upon leaving secondary school. The world has changed a great deal since the 1960s, and the best jobs now require high levels of literacy and numeracy

in addition to nonacademic skills like effective collaboration and technological savvy. Teachers feel pressed for time, as they always have, but they also know that the high level of literacy needed for success in academia and in the workplace requires more attention to vocabulary.

And third, teachers know that students with rich vocabularies do better in many facets of life. Reading comprehension is definitely tied to the strength and size of one's vocabulary, as mentioned previously. Oral expression, which factors greatly into first impressions, is highly dependent on a person's vocabulary. A first impression is often critical to a student's success—for example, a college or job interview depends on making a good first impression. Teachers also know that as students progress through school, the demands in each subject area increase. Those content-area demands require a deep understanding of hundreds of words. Our students, many of whom have been subjected to years of multiple-choice testing of reading and vocabulary, must be reconditioned to learn words not only at a recognition level or with answers from which to choose but also at a deep level for application in speaking and writing.

The Teacher's Perspective

I understand the concerns that teachers have about the size and strength of their students' vocabularies. When I was a full-time classroom teacher, my concerns were mainly about the actual words I should teach explicitly because they were vital to understanding content, and how to best encourage incidental or self-directed vocabulary learning. These areas of concern seem to resonate with the hundreds of teachers I've worked with to improve vocabulary instruction as well.

I also understand that teachers have doubts about the words their instructional materials target for instruction. When I was teaching short stories, essays, drama, and poetry, I questioned the words my literature textbook emphasized. Sometimes I thought, "Who in the world selected these words?" Archaic terms, words used metaphorically, and lists of words to study for the ACT and SAT often seemed so disconnected from what I felt my students needed to know *right then* for academic success.

My doubts were validated when, as a high school English teacher, I discovered that my students lacked a knowledge of words that I assumed they knew well. For example, I was surprised once when my students, who knew the word *summary* and had actually written summaries in my class, couldn't tell me what the word *summarize* meant. This moment, in the first class of the day, allowed me to check with all my students later in the day about their knowledge of inflectional endings. I remember being fairly shocked that ninth graders didn't know the ending *-ize* is used with verbs. (Thus, *summarize* often means "to write a summary"). Upon further probing, I discovered the majority of them didn't know that *-er* or *-or* in a noun often signifies a person, as in *teacher*, *sailor*, and *actor*.

Because of the gap that I found in their learning, I wove small teaching moments into instruction for the next few weeks as we encountered inflectional endings attached to words of which they had some basic knowledge. I gradually started selecting words that I found necessary for the deep understanding of the text at hand—not necessarily the same words the publisher had selected. Also, I wanted my students to be word-seekers, to find words in the books they chose for independent reading, and to be genuinely interested in growing their own vocabularies. I understood that by requiring my students to read their self-selected books for more than two hours a week in class and for homework, I could support their vocabulary growth by asking them to be cognizant of words they did not know, to record them, and to apply them. I finally settled on a vocabulary log assignment in which students would find several unknown words per week in their reading or in their environments and tackle those words by recording the context, defining each word as it was used in context, and using the word in an original sentence. Periodically, I asked students to do *word talks* during which they shared a word or two with the class and explained why those words were important or interesting. Eventually, I also made a section on my final exam that required students to argue for ten words they thought everyone in their grade level should learn. These assignments weren't perfect, but they were certainly more aligned with how people authentically learn vocabulary through reading and participating in life.

About This Book

With these realities and concerns in mind, I have drawn from some of those improvised lessons and devised a framework for effective vocabulary minilessons. The term *minilessons* refers to short lessons that can be completed in twenty minutes or less. This book offers more than one hundred minilessons for immediate use that target specific words and often suggest related words. The chapters and sections in this book group minilessons in ways that build on similarities. In some cases, the target words appear alphabetically. In other cases, they appear in groups based on word length, sound pattern, thematic relationship, or some other kind of similarity.

Chapter 1 outlines the components that make up these minilessons and explains how to logistically implement each. Chapter 2 offers descriptions of the different research-based, time-tested, instructional strategies that are noted throughout the lessons in this book. Teachers can broadly apply these types of instructional strategies to effective vocabulary instruction. These strategies appear throughout the book within minilessons but are also provided in more depth in this chapter as a reference, and also so you can find your own unique ways to apply them to instruction more broadly if you wish. Chapter 2 also includes short descriptions of relevant digital tools. Chapters 3 through 7 describe specific minilessons for some of the essential vocabulary words I've identified for helping to ensure success for elementary students in academics and beyond. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on roots, and lessons cover roots alphabetically. Due to the

disproportionately high number of roots as compared to other types of word parts, chapter 3 addresses roots beginning with the letters a–k, and chapter 4 addresses roots beginning with the letters l–z. Next, chapter 5 offers lessons centered around target words with common prefixes. Chapter 6 similarly offers lessons for words with common suffixes. Lessons for common academic vocabulary and terms encountered in testing appear in chapter 7. Chapter 8 focuses on terms to expand students' word choices beyond the simple or slang terms they often fall back on and overuse.

I recommend digital tools and resources in some minilessons. Websites and applications are suggested only when they seem to fit the content well or add extra support or enrichment. Additionally, an appendix featuring an index of vocabulary words (page 245) lists all words that are included in these minilessons, so you can quickly look up any specific word to see if it's covered in this resource. This feature can support you as you find important vocabulary in content-area classroom materials that you plan to use in instruction.

This book is not a program, a textbook, or a workbook. It does not have to be digested or utilized in any set manner; the way you use what's offered here is up to you. It's a collection of ideas that—when brought to life based on your unique teaching situation—can change the lives of your students for the better. My hope is that you'll find support for what you already do and inspiration for things you could do differently. As teachers know, with larger vocabularies, your students have a greater chance of being successful in their academic work, communities, and future workplaces.

Final Thoughts

Vocabulary in a SNAP is a resource for you no matter where you are on the vocabulary instruction spectrum. If you're just beginning to feel the itch to improve in this area, terrific! If you've been tinkering with vocabulary instruction for a while, you will find detailed ideas here that can supplement what you're already doing. And if you're already an expert teacher of vocabulary, you will find precise suggestions and tools here that save you time and give you new ideas.