

Teaching Words and How They WORK

SMALL CHANGES for
**BIG VOCABULARY
RESULTS**

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Preface

This book is about words in the texts that students read in schools and beyond. This is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the first book with the goal of increasing students' interest and knowledge of words. It is, however, the first book on vocabulary instruction that builds on knowledge from the digital revolution. The rapid processing and big data of computers have meant a revolution in our understandings of the vocabulary of texts. Scholars are no longer limited by the tedious process of hand counting words. Now the numbers, kinds, and distributions of words from millions of texts can be established in a nano-second. This book is the first to apply the information from digitized databases of school texts to vocabulary instruction.

The view of vocabulary learning in this book has been described as generative (meaning that students have the strategies to generate meanings of unknown words). Throughout the book, I also will refer to the view as a network or relationship approach. Each of the nine chapters in the book supports this view that words are not learned as isolated entities but in relationship to other words and the underlying concepts that they represent.

The first chapter of the book gives an overview of this approach, while the second chapter describes the view of implementation of this approach. Chapters 3 through 5 present aspects of the foundational or core vocabulary of text. This core vocabulary is powerful because of its content (Chapter 3), its morphological structures (Chapter 4), and its versatility in taking on different meanings (Chapter 5).

The core vocabulary, while important, represents only a small portion of the words in the English dictionary. Knowledge about the rare vocabulary of texts is essential for successful reading. All of the thousands of rare words that can be expected to appear in school texts and beyond cannot be taught, but students can be taught about similarities and uniqueness in the roles and types of rare words in narrative texts (Chapter 6) and informational texts (Chapter 7). The final two chapters deal with two topics about which educators ask numerous

questions: text complexity and English learners.

The perspective on vocabulary learning and instruction will be new to many readers. Further, the means of implementation that is recommended throughout the book also is likely to be unique. The ideas about vocabulary instruction may be

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revolutionary, but this does not mean that existing vocabulary practices need to be overthrown in one fell swoop. Long-lasting changes in the complex contexts of classrooms are made through steady application of small changes.

The two perspectives of this book—one on learning and the other on implementation—are rich and thought-provoking. The first two chapters are devoted to developing these views, beginning with the perspective on learning in Chapter 1 and the perspective on teaching in Chapter 2. In each of the subsequent chapters, I have used a similar structure. Each chapter begins with examples of texts with vocabulary features related to the chapter's theme. This is followed by three sections. The first section, labeled "The Evidence," presents findings from scholarship related to a feature of vocabulary in school texts.

The second section, entitled "Small Changes = Big Results," describes a teacher's choices in making small changes to implement evidence-based vocabulary instruction. The teachers' stories come from workshops that I have presented across the United States on the content of this volume. The final section, called "The Last Word," can be viewed as a short blog. It provides a venue for highlighting a concern or response to questions that have been raised in workshops on the book's content.

Acknowledgments for a book that represents a 15-year journey are numerous. To the many teachers who responded, in workshops and presentations, with enthusiasm, outstanding questions, and descriptions of their practice, I wish I could acknowledge each of you individually, but the list would consume all of the space allotted for this book. Do know that your questions and comments have aided me greatly in refining and extending this work.

My colleagues at Pearson, especially Nancy Winship and Amy Fleming, and at Scholastic, Janelle Cherrington, Janet Reed, Jeannie Hutchins, and Cynthia Rothman, were instrumental in clarifying and elaborating my ideas. I apologize to those whom I have missed on this

list. There have been so many of you who have given me opportunities and asked brilliant questions.

My knowledge about vocabulary and how it functions in text draws heavily on conversations and collaborations with colleagues and friends. Bill Nagy generously has provided me with my very own advanced postdoctoral seminar that has extended well over a decade. Gina Cervetti, Judy Scott, and Amanda Goodwin have been partners who have contributed greatly to this work.

Alice Folkins, my research administrator, has conducted literally thousands of analyses of the vocabulary in texts and also supervised the massive effort of scanning and proofreading texts to make these analyses of vocabulary possible. Alice, this work wouldn't be what it is without you.

Suzanne Barchers has been a stalwart over the past 2 years, giving me feedback on each chapter in every incarnation of the book. The careful reading of the final manuscript by Leslie Hall gave me the incentive to say, "It's done!"

Jean Ward generously found a home for this volume at Teachers College Press. I have treasured Jean's collegiality and friendship over the past decade and I hope, despite the challenges created by my obsessive revisions, that the friendship will be sustained.

As is the case with all of my projects, this book reflects the nourishment that Charley provides me. To recognize Charley's love for words and precise language, I want to be clear that I am using the word *nourishment* both literally and figuratively. I am able to do what I do because of the food that you provide me and the love that you give me.

—EHH, Santa Cruz, CA