



## Part IV: Vocabulary Instruction

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Part IV in this series examines the aspects of Vocabulary Instruction that have been proven to be effective strategies for improving reading skills. Having a broad and rich vocabulary allows us to understand each other and communicate precisely what we mean. As educators, some of our main goals are to teach students how to recognize words when listening, choose appropriate words when speaking, understand the meaning and context of words when reading and to effectively write words on paper in a way that clearly explains the writer's thoughts. Vocabulary skills are life skills...they are the basis for all communication.

### **Teaching Vocabulary Indirectly:**

Students learn most of their vocabulary indirectly as they encounter new words everyday. Oral vocabulary skills are vital to helping students make sense of what they are reading. Students learn vocabulary skills indirectly through:

**Daily Oral Language** - Children learn the meanings of words through everyday conversations with peers and adults. Children often say the "darndest" things because they repeat the interesting things they hear others say. Vocabulary increases as the number of oral language experiences increases.

**Listening to Adults Read** – Listening to an adult read fluently can teach word meanings indirectly. Adults should pause to explain any unfamiliar words and then discuss the new words and concepts found in the book. Teachers can do this on a daily basis in all subject areas.

**Independent Reading** – Vocabulary increases as children increase the amount that they read on their own. While this idea is no real secret, the inherent problem is often how to motivate students to read independently. A good way to approach this problem is to find out what the students are interested in and provide lots of appropriate reading materials that are related to their interests.

### **Teaching Vocabulary Directly:**

Direct Instruction of vocabulary is necessary for teaching conceptually complex words that are important to know, but may not be heard in everyday conversation. Students can be taught vocabulary directly by the following methods:

**Specific Word Instruction** – Teaching individual words helps students to have a deeper understanding of word meanings, which gives them a firm foundation for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students better comprehend what they read when unfamiliar words have already been explained. Actively using new words in a variety of contexts over an extended period of time helps students to learn and retain word definitions. For example, in teaching the concept of “*evaporation*”, teachers can provide extended vocabulary instruction by asking the students what they already know about evaporation, having them give examples of experiences they may have had with water evaporating, and then reading and discussing a story or scientific text on evaporation. The teacher could demonstrate evaporation with a simple visual and hands-on classroom science experiment, and then students could generate sentences describing the experiment. Finally, students could come up with new examples of evaporation. The main goal in teaching new words is to give students many opportunities to see and actively use the new word in a wide variety of different contexts. Word meaning can be reinforced as the students actively use the new word repeatedly in different learning situations.

**Word Learning Strategies** – Students need skills to be able to independently figure out what unfamiliar words mean:

- **Dictionary Skills:** Students should learn how to use dictionaries and other reference aids as problem solving tools. If students do not understand a word presented in a textbook, the teacher can demonstrate how to find that word in the dictionary and determine which definition appropriately fits the context of the passage. The teacher could then substitute the appropriate definition with the unknown word in the original sentence.
- **Word Parts:** Learning prefixes, suffixes, base words and root words can help students determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. The most common prefixes (un-, re-, in-, dis-) give vital clues about 2/3 of all English words. The most important suffixes to learn are ones that have concrete definitions (e.g., -less = without, -ful = full of). Base words form the basis of many other words (e.g., mortal: mortality, mortally, immortal, immortalize). Word roots are foreign words that

have formed the basis of many English words. Teachers should teach word roots as they occur within content area texts.

- **Context Clues:** The meanings of words are often hinted at in the words, phrases and sentences that surround unknown words. Context clues can be restatements, definitions, examples or descriptions that impart word meaning. Teachers should demonstrate how to link context clues to unfamiliar words by emphasizing the context clue as they re-read the passage.

Students develop *word consciousness* as their vocabulary increases. Word consciousness is the awareness of word meanings and the choosing of words to communicate power, emotion and context. Teachers can develop this subtle, but effective, ability by calling attention to the way authors choose words to portray particular meanings, encouraging word play (e.g., puns or palindromes), researching word origins and pointing out examples of how a particular word is given meaning through everyday usage.