

NO MORE “LOOK UP THE LIST”
VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

DEAR READERS,

Much like the diet phenomenon *Eat This, Not That*, this series aims to replace some existing practices with approaches that are more effective—healthier, if you will—for our students. We hope to draw attention to practices that have little support in research or professional wisdom and offer alternatives that have greater support. Each text is collaboratively written by authors representing research and practice. Section 1 offers a practitioner’s perspective on a practice in need of replacing and helps us understand the challenges, temptations, and misunderstandings that have led us to this ineffective approach. Section 2 provides a researcher’s perspective on the lack of research to support the ineffective practice(s) and reviews research supporting better approaches. In Section 3, the author representing a practitioner’s perspective gives detailed descriptions of how to implement these better practices. By the end of each book, you will understand both what not to do, and what to do, to improve student learning.

It takes courage to question one’s own practice—to shift away from what you may have seen throughout your years in education and toward something new that you may have seen few if any colleagues use. We applaud you for demonstrating that courage and wish you the very best in your journey from this to that.

Best wishes,

— *Nell K. Duke and Ellin Oliver Keene, series editors*

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INSTRUCTION

CHARLENE COBB
CAMILLE BLACHOWICZ

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

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INTRODUCTION

ELLIN OLIVER KEENE

When Nell and I discussed the concept for Not This, But That, vocabulary instruction, specifically look-it-up-and-define-it practices, were among the first topics we thought about for the series. We talked about how ingrained these practices are and how often they're part of daily fare in classrooms and that parents actually *demand* that their children be given long vocabulary lists to look up and define. I was the mom demanding that students *not* be asked to do it.

At the time, my daughter had just been accepted to college and I told Nell, the mother of very young children, about the horror of tearful nights at our house when Elizabeth left the vocabulary list lookup until all the other homework was complete and cried (at 11:30 P.M.) as she faced the boredom of looking up twenty to thirty words and creating sentences in which the context revealed her understanding of the word. The final straw came late one night when she defined *verisimilitude* and wrote the following sentence: "We should avoid verisimilitude." I was so exasperated, knowing that she was unlikely to remember the words she was defining that I actually said, "Just go with it, honey. You're already into college."

She knew it wasn't working to build her vocabulary, I knew it wasn't working, as did hundreds of my colleagues who continued the practice because alternatives were not well understood. This book changes that forever and I hope it saves hundreds of students and their parents from late-night meltdowns!

For that, we have to thank Dr. Charlene Cobb and Dr. Camille Blachowicz, coauthors of this book. Char is Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning in East Maine School District 63 in Des Plaines, Illinois. She brings experience as a teacher, reading specialist, and assistant superintendent to the immediately useful vocabulary practices in

this book. Camille is Professor Emeritus and Co-Director of the Reading Leadership Institute at National–Louis University in Chicago. Camille has a long-standing record in undertaking research on vocabulary and then expertly translating it into useful classroom practices.

In Section 2, Camille reminds us that understanding word meaning is one of the most significant factors that influence reading comprehension. We believe that it is critical that teachers discontinue ineffective practices and immerse students in learning situations that will lead to incidental and intentional vocabulary learning of the “Flood, Fast, Focus” variety Char and Camille suggest. Of all the useful practices they describe, one through-line that stood out to me: *Engagement in word learning is key*. Kids should have choice in at least some of the words they learn, and they need teachers who discuss and model their own excitement about words. When adults show how fascinated they are by words and how much fun it can be to engage in wordplay and grow our word knowledge, children will follow suit. Char and Camille both make the case for new and engaging practices and provide teachers with dozens of them that can be applied in classrooms tomorrow.

In a study Camille cites in Section 2, a student actually uttered the following words, “I used to only think about vocabulary in school. The whole world is vocabulary.” Wouldn’t that be music to your ears coming from one of your students? We believe that this book will help you make that viewpoint common among your students. We encourage you to experiment with the ideas in this book and to familiarize yourself with the research Camille synthesizes so clearly so that you can help others, including parents, understand that vocabulary learning is (mercifully) different than they remember. When you’re done with this book, pass it on to colleagues. There are far too many children in this country writing sentences like “We should avoid verisimilitude” at 11:30 at night. And, really, once you know what *verisimilitude* means, it’s a very useful word and it sounds cool to say too! Happy word learning!

SECTION 1

**NOT
THIS**

**“Look ’Em Up, Write the Definition,
Write a Sentence”**

CHARLENE COBB

In middle school, my youngest daughter’s vocabulary instruction resided within the pages of a little book with a series of lessons. Each lesson focused on twenty words and a set of activities such as finding synonyms for the words, making analogies, or completing a crossword puzzle. To this day, my daughter remembers two words from the program, *saboteur* and *espionage*. Now, my daughter is neither a spy nor an author of action thrillers, but she held onto those words because she liked to say them. That kind of authentic pleasure in the sounds of language is something to be celebrated, but it wasn’t taught to her. It was a happy circumstance. The planned “instruction”—playing a few games in a workbook—wasn’t enough, and the majority of those words in that little vocabulary workbook stayed right where they were.

Learning Words Means Using Them

For many of us, the vocabulary instruction we received (or in some cases endured) consisted primarily of looking up a list of words, writing the definition, and/or writing a sentence with the word, then a quiz on the definitions. This weekly process repeated itself, like the cycle of a washing machine, each time emptied of what came before. We couldn't hold onto our word knowledge because our grasp was limited by the brief weeklong encounter with the words. There was little expectation of repeated encounters with these words and even less expectation of using the words in our reading and writing. As you'll learn in Section 2, there are different levels of understanding a word's meaning, but without practice in the full range of ways we use a word, our word knowledge is limited and falls from our grasp as the next cycle of words enter.

We Need to Question the Way We Were Taught

Most students don't enjoy learning words the "look-up-the-list" way (except that they're an easy A for some) and neither do teachers. Yet we continue to teach this way. Why? Like most of us, we default to teaching the way we were taught. I'll admit that I did. I might not have enjoyed teaching that way, but I didn't consider doing it differently until I was shown another way. As I learned more, I began to evaluate my current practice rather than passively replicating how I had been taught. I know that teachers work hard and often hold themselves to the unrealistic expectation of reinventing everything. This book is not about discarding everything you are already doing. I believe that we do the best we can with the knowledge we have, but then when we know more, we do better. Instead of just working harder, perhaps teachers could work smarter by finding out what the latest research says about best practice and asking ourselves if there's a better way to provide vocabulary instruction.

Why We Struggle with Change

I began working as a reading specialist nearly twenty-five years ago. Over those twenty-five years, I have been a reading specialist, district-level administrator, and university instructor, and I have been lucky to work with many amazing teachers. Unfortunately, vocabulary instruction has remained almost the same as it was when I started my career in education. I still see vocabulary workbooks, but in some cases vocabulary workbooks have been replaced with work sheets or computer programs. Materials may look different, but students are still presented with fifteen to twenty words per week. Content-area vocabulary too often focuses on boldface words and the use of glossaries as the main source of word definition. Why is that? With all that is known about best practices for teaching and learning vocabulary, as you'll see in Section 2, why are we still teaching vocabulary in the least effective ways?

Teachers' Common Questions, Familiar Answers, and Some Considerations for Change

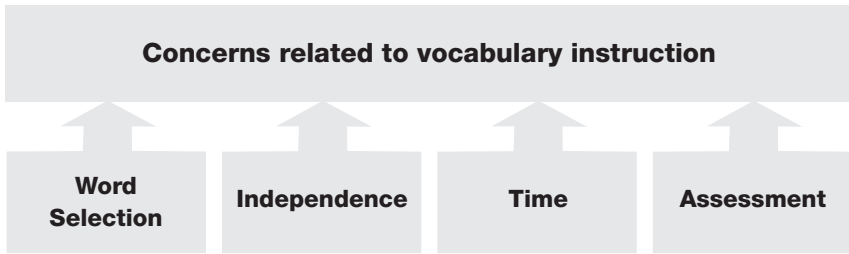
We start with the fundamental question: How can we teach vocabulary so that students can become better readers and writers? Within this, in conversations with teachers about vocabulary instruction, I hear the same four concerns (see Figure 1–1):

How does research answer these questions?

see Section 2,
page 20

- How many words should I teach and how do I select them?
- How can I foster student independence using resources such as dictionaries and glossaries?
- How can I find time for meaningful vocabulary instruction when I need to focus on so many other priorities in the curriculum?
- How can I assess and hold students accountable, especially when some students don't remember the words that I teach?

Figure 1-1



These are all legitimate issues, raised by teachers who are committed to their students' growth. The purpose of this section is to think about which practices we want to change and why, so let's take a look at each concern and evaluate how teachers commonly address it in their classrooms.

Word Selection: How do I select words and when should I teach them?

I'm never sure if I'm choosing too many words or too few. When I'm teaching with a novel, I usually select a few words from each section or chapter. You know, the ones that I'm pretty sure the students won't understand. If they don't know the word, then they won't comprehend what they're reading. If I select three to five words in a book with ten chapters, they end up with thirty to fifty words for each novel. Sometimes I can find words that have already been selected from lesson plans online or words that other people have already used. I have the students do their vocabulary as independent work. They look the words up in the dictionary and write a sentence using the word.

Many new teachers, and even experienced teachers, lack confidence in their ability to select vocabulary words from novels. They want students to be able to read and understand the text, but they recognize that some words will be too difficult. This can occur more frequently

when an entire class is reading the same novel. With only one text, some students are sure to struggle and others will have little to no difficulty with new words. For teachers who use multiple novels, selecting words from three or more texts can be a daunting endeavor. Whether selecting from one novel or multiple novels, students are expected to define and learn an extensive list of words. This may be why teachers frequently rely on external sources such as novel units, or lessons posted on Internet sites. However, whether teachers select the words themselves or use other resources, frequently the sheer volume of words means that the task may become disconnected from the primary goal of reading and comprehending the book. More importantly, looking up a word that is isolated from the text often does not enable students to understand that word when they encounter it in context.

Our science and social studies textbooks have all the important words for each section presented on the first page. They give the student the word and sometimes also a brief definition. We always go over those words before we start reading. Sometimes I assign vocabulary for homework. I have the students look up the words in the glossary and then use them in a sentence. There's always at least one work sheet that has some kind of vocabulary activity. Sometimes we do them together as a class, or the students work on it independently.

Many teachers rely on the textbook publishers' word selection. And in fact, many of the words selected by publishers are important words. But understanding content-area texts involves more than learning the meaning of the boldface words. Learning content vocabulary is reliant on students' prior knowledge and their level of understanding of the concepts represented by the vocabulary. This can be especially problematic for second language learners who may not have

**For examples
of content-area
vocabulary
practices**

see Section 3,
pages 52–65

the background knowledge needed for deep understanding of the concepts presented. Additionally, the internal structures of content-area texts can make them more difficult to read. In addition to the words related to the content topic, students need to understand the process and function words that repeatedly occur in science and social studies texts. For example, process words and phrases such as *state a conclusion*, *draw a summary*, and *skim/scan the text* or function words such as *therefore*, *moreover*, and *in conclusion*, can be challenging for many students, but especially second language learners.

In both of these scenarios, teachers are relying on external sources in determining the words selected for instruction. There is a certain comfort level for teachers in using an outside, authoritative source. But not all word lists and definitions are of equal value. The teacher is an essential mediator. The individual teacher needs to evaluate which words are most needed by her students and to identify meaningful opportunities for students to use and develop their understanding of the words. If we only pass on a decontextualized list to our students, we reinforce the idea that words are not owned but borrowed from someone else. In Sections 2 and 3, we will share some ways to think about how to select words, how many words to teach, and some engaging ways to teach them.

Independence: How can I help my students become independent word learners?

For ideas on developing independent word learners

see Section 3, pages 44–45

When we are doing a novel unit, I usually give the students a list of words for the upcoming sections we'll be reading. One of the things I have them do is look the words up in the dictionary before we read. This helps with vocabulary, and also gives them practice as independent word learners. Even in the inter-

mediate grades, some of the students come without any dictionary

skills. They don't know how to use the guide words at the top of the page, and they have no idea what the pronunciation guide means. So I'm able to kill two birds with one stone. They are learning the meaning of the words they'll see in the novel and they are also learning how to use resources for looking up words. I will either teach or review some of the dictionary skills when I introduce the words. Then I give them time to practice their dictionary skills with the words from the novel.

With science and social studies, I have students use the glossaries. I want them to know that they should look for these tools when they are reading. Our new science book has definitions placed in the margins, but I still want them to understand how important it is to use the glossary.

It's true that it is important for students to know how to use a variety of resources related to vocabulary. It's also true that students need to understand the external features of texts, such as glossaries. Many teachers I've worked with realize that instruction related to these is not highly effective if done in isolation, so I rarely see work sheets on using guide words. In most of the schools in which I work, teachers realize the value of these skills and so they incorporate them into novel studies and content instruction. The problem with most definitional approaches to vocabulary instruction is that they generally lead to more superficial understanding: Looking up words in the dictionary does not necessarily improve comprehension. Dictionary definitions are most helpful if you already have some understanding of the concept or word meaning. Many definitions don't contain enough information to enable you to use the word accurately. The word *run* provides a perfect example of this dilemma. There are more than one hundred definitions of the word *run* in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1979). These definitions cover nearly the entire page in the dictionary. The word is defined as a verb, a noun, and an adjective. Now imagine a second language student reading the following

sentences in a social studies text. “In 1858 Abraham Lincoln challenged Stephen Douglas for his seat in the U.S. Senate. He lost that election. But the debates he held with Douglas led to his run for the presidency in 1860.” In these sentences, the word *run* is the thirteenth definition: “to enter into an election contest.” Most students go for the first definition, which in this case is “to go faster than a walk” (1005). Now let’s make it a bit more confusing by asking the student to define *seat*. The correct definition is found in the first line, “a special chair of one in eminence: the status represented.” Yes, easy to find, but not so easy to understand.

I vividly remember a fifth-grade student who was reading a book about a group of boys out for a walk on a dark night. They were hoping to convince another group of boys to join them. The words of the text went something like, “It was already dark. John was nervous. He didn’t think they had a ghost of a chance.” When I asked the student to tell me about the story, he explained, “The boy was nervous about seeing a ghost.” He had mapped the words *dark night*, *nervous boy*, and *ghost* to create an incorrect summary. Looking up the word *ghost* would be of no help to this student. What he needed was an understanding of the figure of speech.

Content-area words with multiple meanings abound and confuse students. Consider these words: *yard*, *current*, *sink*, *bear*, *plane*, and *pound*. How would you define *current* in social studies and in science? How about *plane* in math and in social studies? We need to be thoughtful and intentional as we select the words we teach our students and what we ask students to do with these words. Nevertheless, this process of giving students a list and asking them to look up the words persists in many classrooms. The simplicity of looking words up in a dictionary or glossary supersedes our discomfort in doing something that we sense is not highly effective. Our belief in the need for repeated practice of skills supplants our thinking that this practice is not necessarily improving our primary goal of greater comprehension.

And in some cases, we just don't know what else to do, so we rely on doing things the same way we were taught.

I don't want to give the impression dictionaries or glossaries should not be used as word-learning resources. While traveling recently, I used a GPS (global positioning system) to find a route to a specific location. As I struggled to find my way (even with the help of the GPS as a resource), I came to see the analogy of a dictionary to a GPS system. Let me explain. This was the first time I had ever traveled to this area. I knew nothing about the location I was trying to find. I had an address. I entered the address and a set of directions appeared. I had some options such as fastest route and least use of tollways. I set my course and began driving. Oh, by the way, I was alone in the car. As I struggled to listen to the directions, pay attention to the road signs, and make the right decisions, I discovered that a road was closed. The GPS didn't know this and so it kept trying to return me to a route that was impossible. I eventually found my way, but not without a significant amount of work on my part. So how is a GPS like a dictionary? They are both resources that guide us to a destination (location or word meaning). They both are more effective if you know a little bit about where you are going when you start the journey. They can both take you to an incorrect place, and it's always helpful to have someone else along for the journey (see Figure 1–2).

I will not stop using a GPS system, just as I would not encourage teachers and students to stop using dictionaries and other resources. Rather, I encourage teachers to think more broadly about their use. Do students understand what it means to “know” a word and how this knowledge develops over time? How can students work collaboratively to generate word meanings? Are students able to transfer their word learning from a dictionary definition to other texts? What other experiences might they need to help them do so? Do the words they

**For a better
framework for
vocabulary
instruction**

see Section 2,
page 28

Figure 1–2 Why Using a Dictionary Is Like Using Your GPS

Resource	Dictionary	GPS	Analogy
Goal	You are trying to get the specific meaning of a word.	You are trying to get to a specific location.	I need specific information.
The resource as a support	You know a little bit about the word and you are seeking greater clarification.	You have knowledge of your location and you are seeking validation or the best route.	OK—this makes sense, I can do this.
Overreliance on the resource	You have no idea what the word means and you end up with an incorrect definition.	You are in unfamiliar surroundings and end up lost.	I have no idea where this is taking me.
Guidance	You share your thinking with a peer or teacher to ensure accuracy.	You have a passenger who can adjust the settings or choose an alternate route.	It's so much easier when I have support!

look up enable them to become better readers and writers? For students to become independent word learners, we need to do more than refer them to a resource. We need to give them a collection of strategies and resources to support them as they navigate their own word learning.

And, we need to be mindful of the obstacles we may be putting in their way. When a teacher stops a read-aloud too often to verbally

define words she thinks kids don't know, it's the equivalent of tossing too many balls to a juggler: The kids become distracted from comprehending the text and won't retain the words introduced either. In content-area instruction, students are often asked to play the vocabulary guessing game: "Does anyone know what xxx means? OK, yeah, kind of, anyone else, OK, yeah, that's close. . . ." These practices communicate an expectation that students should know and hold onto the words without giving them the resources and support to do so. Students who don't know or can't retain the words often interpret their lack of success as a deficit in their capacity. That's the opposite of independence. In the next two sections, you'll learn ways to help students realize that words are something they can acquire and that by learning the right strategies, they can be successful, independent word learners.

Time: How can I find time for vocabulary instruction?

Oh, there's never enough time, that's why I have students do most of their vocabulary work during their independent time or I give it as homework. We have ninety minutes a day for both reading and writing. If I'm trying to do readers' and writers' workshop, I need at least thirty minutes for my small-group reading and another thirty minutes for small-group writing. I try to do some modeling and that means another ten to fifteen minutes in both reading and writing. I'm also supposed to find time for them to do independent reading and to confer with the students on those books! I'm lucky if I get some vocabulary instruction in once a week.

I probably spend a little more time on vocabulary for science and social studies because they have to know those words. It's also easier to point out the words that the students need to know because they are usually boldface or highlighted in some way. Also, many times there are vocabulary worksheets or activities already available in the teacher resources. But I usually assign them for homework. Content-area words that express abstract concepts are

particularly hard. How do you teach the word *economy* or *relativity*? We do spend a lot of time talking about the content and so there are opportunities to talk about some of the words. But sometimes students don't seem to remember the words if they come up just a few weeks later in another unit.

In the middle school, we have so much content to cover and so little time. I only see my students for forty-three minutes a day. In that time, I have to teach them about the content and give them time to talk and write about it as well. The content words they need to know are highlighted in the textbook. I do encourage them to use the glossary at the back of the book. Also, with the online version of our text that some students use at home, they can click on any of the highlighted words and have the word and the definition read to them. Sometimes for homework I'll have students explain the important words from the chapter in their own words. Many of the students just reword the definition from the text into a sentence, so I'm not sure how much they're really learning about the word. I have a degree in social studies, and I didn't take any reading methods courses. I've learned about teaching content vocabulary at some workshops and the district has provided some professional development on content-area reading, but I'm not very comfortable taking time away from teaching the content to do those types of vocabulary activities.

Teachers and students are always prisoners of time. Teachers are always being asked to do more, but the length of the school day remains the same. In intermediate and junior high classrooms, the emphasis is generally on reading comprehension and writing composition. Teachers are expected to “cover” the anthology or novels within specified time frames. When teachers use only one text, they feel the need to spend additional time supporting comprehension instruction for students who find the text too difficult. Vocabulary is frequently marginalized to independent work or homework.

In most junior high and middle schools, social studies and science are taught departmentally. Social studies and science teachers enjoy teaching their content. They've worked hard to become experts. Many have not had opportunities to learn the most effective methods of incorporating vocabulary instruction into their lessons. Add to this the fact that many of the content texts are difficult for students reading below level and extremely difficult for second language learners who lack the background knowledge needed to access the content. In both elementary and middle school classrooms, I see a significant amount of reading aloud by both students and teachers during science and social studies. Teachers spend time explaining the content, and there are some rich discussions occurring. These discussions are important. They support students' oral language development and provide opportunities to talk about words. However, discussions alone are not enough for students to develop a deep level of word meaning. Students need opportunities to read and practice using the words in meaningful ways.

Again, it's little wonder that in these classrooms vocabulary instruction can be minimal. Finding time for vocabulary instruction is directly related to the other three issues: Teachers need to be thoughtful in the words that they select for vocabulary instruction, they need to think broadly about moving beyond dictionaries and word lists as the primary source of word learning, and they must use instruction and assessment interactively. We can't always change the amount of time we are allotted, but we can change the structures and methods we use to deliver instruction.

Assessment: How can I assess and hold students accountable?

I have to have some way of evaluating vocabulary. I've used the vocabulary assessments that go along with the units from core reading programs, textbook chapter word lists, and online

For ideas of more effective assessment practices

see Section 3, pages 72, 74–80

word lists for novels to create multiple-choice tests. Sometimes I'll try to vary the format and have students match the word to the correct definition. I like to have several assessments each quarter so that I can average the scores to come up with the grade. For science and social studies, it's much easier because there are always one or two vocabulary questions on the unit tests.

It's frustrating that vocabulary tests are a lot like spelling tests. Many students get good scores on their test, but then don't ever use the word correctly again. Also, in science or social studies, it seems like they understand the word while we're learning it, but if it comes up again or in a context other than social studies, they don't make the connection.

This response reflects the realities and the frustrations many teachers feel when it comes to assessing vocabulary. It also brings forward the concern that as data from state and national assessments are analyzed, the vocabulary scores may point to the need for improvement. How do we measure that learning and improvement? Relying solely on outside resources (including textbooks) for vocabulary selection and assessment is not the right answer, but it's an easy one. However, when given the task of designing assessments, it's little wonder that teachers model their self-created tests on those commercial tests they've used in the past. Many teachers don't have access to a better model.

Teacher-created assessments can be another area of frustration. Constructing assessments can be time-consuming, and some teachers lack confidence in their ability to create valid tests. In middle school and junior high content classes, a vocabulary test provides one opportunity for students to demonstrate their word knowledge. Once the test is graded and the unit is completed, instruction moves on to the next topic. There is rarely time to go back and revisit the vocabulary from previous chapters.

This type of vocabulary assessment is based on the traditional input–outcome aspect of teaching and learning. Input: The teacher selects the

content (vocabulary words) and delivers instruction to the students. Output: The teacher tests the students on the content. The scores from the content determine the grade. Notice that the input–outcome model is light on the aspect of *learning*. How many of us have heard (or even said), “I taught it, but they didn’t learn it”? In Section 2 we will show how research has repeatedly informed us that word learning is incremental. Word learning is also dependent upon the students’ prior knowledge. When we assess students, we have to consider that they may have memorized a definition that can be attached to a label, but they may not have developed the depth of conceptual and word knowledge needed to know this word and use it flexibly in other situations. An end of the unit, multiple-choice assessment does not yield this type of information. This leads us to question: How can we assess students in ways that measure the full understanding of words?

Of course it’s difficult to change the method of assessment without also considering the methods of instruction. When I work with teachers, I encourage them to think about teaching and assessing as a continuum. I want teachers to realize that students need opportunities to increase both their breadth and depth of word knowledge. I want students to increase the number of words they have in their receptive and expres-

sive vocabularies. But I also want them to know a word at multiple levels, across a variety of contexts. I want teachers to think about the importance of word-learning strategies. I also ask them to begin thinking differently about assessing vocabulary. Can word-learning strategies such as word sorts, knowledge ratings, and concept of definition frames be used as diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments? If we move away from the “list, define, create a sentence” structure of teaching, can that support a more informed assessment process? Perhaps it might be time to start thinking differently about teaching and assessing vocabulary.

To learn how instruction and assessment can support one another

see Section 3,
pages 71–72

Effective Vocabulary Instruction in Every Classroom

Up to this point, we've shared some concerns teachers have regarding vocabulary instruction. But if we're honest, there are some classrooms where vocabulary instruction does not occur. As districts and schools transition to the Common Core State Standards, this is no longer an option. The Common Core State Standards recognize the importance of vocabulary instruction kindergarten through grade 12. In *Appendix A: Research Supporting the Key Elements of the Standards* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010b), the authors of Common Core state, "The importance of students acquiring a rich and varied vocabulary cannot be overstated" (32). Expectations for vocabulary are found in Reading Standard 4, for both Literature and Informational Texts, and also in the Language Standards 4–6. The level of rigor for vocabulary increases across grade levels.

In the intermediate grades, students are expected not only to understand figurative language, but also to analyze the impact of these words on the meaning of the text. Within the Language Standards, students are expected to acquire and use general academic and domain-specific vocabulary that is grade-level appropriate. The intent of the Common Core State Standards is for students to develop rich and flexible word knowledge.

In the next section, Camille will share the research related to best practices in vocabulary instruction. Then in Section 3 we will share some strategies and techniques that invite you to start thinking differently about vocabulary instruction in your classroom!

SECTION 2

WHY NOT? WHAT WORKS?

What We Know About Vocabulary Acquisition and What It Means for Instruction

CAMILLE BLACHOWICZ

What's Lost When We Tell Students to “Look Up the List”

Let's be honest. Most teachers (including me) have, at one time or another, put a list of words on the board and asked students to look them up. Maybe the practice was done in the heat of the moment: We were rushed for time or needed students to occupy themselves while we handled something more urgent (like someone throwing up in the back of the classroom). But if we reflect on what was happening in students' heads while they filled time (see Figure 2–1), we realize that this work neither developed students' deep understanding of words nor communicated how word knowledge can give students power. Further, “list lookup” does not have a strong foundation in research. Moreover, there is significant research on student difficulty in carrying out the process (McKeown 1993).

Figure 2-1

**What's Happening in Students' Heads
While They're Looking Up the List?**

Hmm, the word is *GLIPPLE*. Let's see. . . . [finding it in the dictionary]
OK, GLIPPLE . . . hmm let's look . . . I see *GLIPPLE*, OK . . . I know I
should write the first definition but that will take me forever. Here's the
shortest definition. I'll write that. OK, definition done.

Now a sentence. OK, it's a verb. How about, "I decided to
GLIPPLE." No, she'll catch on if I do that and just have it the last
word. How about "I *GLIPPLED* yesterday." Yeah, that's it. Done.

In Section 1, Char shared some of teachers' common struggles with vocabulary instruction: word selection, student independence in resource use, assessment, and the bugaboo, time. Before I was a teacher educator and researcher, I was a classroom teacher who struggled with these same issues. I became a teacher through what is now called the "alternative route to certification." As the newest, and most underprepared, teacher in an urban school, I was given the *C* group, students in third, fourth, and fifth grade who struggled in reading and writing. My clearest memory from my first six months of teaching was returning from school to lie on my bed and crying while my graduate-student husband patted the back of his working wife, worrying that we might be en route to unemployment and poverty.

Like so many teachers who must teach struggling students without being prepared for it, I worked hard to rise to the occasion because I fell in love with the kids. The struggling students in my classes were smart, many negotiating life challenges that most adults would find daunting, but their limited word knowledge, background knowledge, or other limiting factors made it difficult for them to develop their understanding of essential concepts and to build background knowledge. As I studied for my certification, I was buoyed by research that suggested I was on the right track (Bos and Anders 1990, 1992). Now, with the emphasis on vocabulary in current initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices

SECTION 3

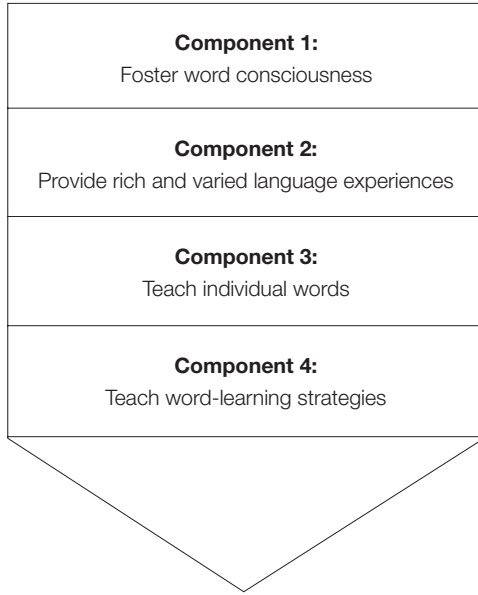
BUT THAT

Flexible Instruction for Vocabulary Learning

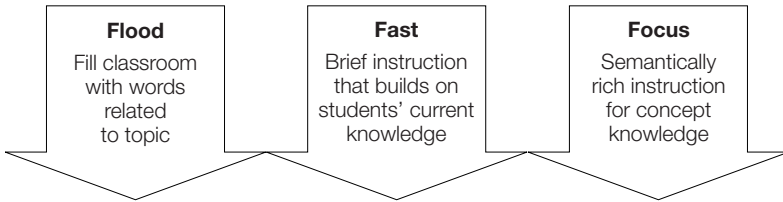
CAMILLE BLACHOWICZ and **CHARLENE COBB**

We know we can do better than putting word lists on the board and asking students to look them up. We've shared the research that tells us how and why, so now let's get into the nitty-gritty of what the practices look like in the classroom. Vocabulary learning needs to happen in a variety of ways over an extended period of time. We need to maximize students' opportunities for incidental learning as well as support word learning through intentional explicit and implicit instruction. In this section, we will help you plan comprehensive vocabulary instruction for your students. As explained in Section 2, effective vocabulary instruction starts with four essential understandings related to depth of knowledge, engagement, the conceptual basis of word knowledge, and both intentional and incidental learning. We connected these to practice by proposing four essential components of a good vocabulary program that have been supported by and developed through research.

Figure 3-1 Connecting Understanding to Practice
Because we understand that vocabulary instruction needs to



We give students a variety of experiences with words over time, adapting our approach to instruction, depending on students' needs and experience with a word.



We provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning



In Section 2, Camille explained that a word's meaning is not usually learned all at once. She used the metaphor of a dimmer switch to describe how the light, or understanding, of a word's meaning, increases over time. The metaphor applies to our vocabulary instruction as well:

We need to choose the intensity of our instruction based on students' needs. There is a framework that informs our instruction called "Flood, Fast, and Focus." See Figure 3–1 for a section organizer.

Fostering Word Consciousness

Take a moment to evaluate existing evidence of word consciousness in your classroom environment, yourself, and your students. Teachers helped us develop the self-analysis tool shown in Figure 3–2 as part of our Multifaceted Comprehensive Instruction (MCVIP) professional development project we shared with you in Section 2 (Baumann et al. 2009–2012). Use it to help you think about the things you do well in your classroom and the areas where you could use some new ideas. If you can't check off some of the items, don't worry. In this section, we'll show you what to do so that you can.

Figure 3–2 Evidence of Word Consciousness in Classroom Environment, Teacher, and Students

<p>Analyze Your Vocabulary Environment</p> <p>1. My classroom shows physical signs of word consciousness. You can see . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> word charts or word walls (showing student input) used and changed regularly<input type="checkbox"/> books, including those on words, wordplay, specialized and learner dictionaries, dictionaries (where students can easily access them)<input type="checkbox"/> labels in classroom<input type="checkbox"/> word games<input type="checkbox"/> puzzle books and software<input type="checkbox"/> student-made word books, alphabet books, dictionaries, computer files, PowerPoint displays, SMART Board lessons
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