

Explicit vocabulary instruction

Improving reading comprehension through explicit vocabulary instruction

The importance of vocabulary

Research in reading comprehension shows that the ability to acquire and express spoken vocabulary is key to improved and sustained reading comprehension (Valencia and Riddle Buly 2004; Snow, Porche, Tabors and Harris 2007). The size of vocabulary, that is, the number and variety of words that students know, is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary years of schooling, and of broader academic and vocational success (Beck, McKeown and Kucan 2002; Clarke, Truelove, Hulme and Snowling 2014). Vocabulary knowledge has strong links with both word reading and reading comprehension (Hiebert and Kami 2005).

Explicit vocabulary instruction

The National Reading Panel (2010) recommends both incidental and intentional or explicit vocabulary instruction to improve reading comprehension. While students will acquire some new vocabulary in the school setting, not enough will be learned incidentally to help close the gap between different groups of students. If vocabulary learning is to be accelerated, word meanings need to be taught explicitly. Explicit instruction of spoken vocabulary is a high impact strategy that increases comprehension more than any other intervention and enhances learning outcomes for all students (Beck, McKeown and Kucan 2002). In an Australian study, explicit instruction of words drawn from the Australian Curriculum, delivered increased gains in vocabulary knowledge relative to control classrooms where vocabulary instruction was incidental (Westerveld, Armstrong, Barton and Peach 2020).

Selecting words for explicit instruction

Beck and McKeown (2013) categorised vocabulary into three tiers according to a word's frequency of use, complexity and meaning. Depending on the student needs, Tier 2 words provide access to academic language with the greatest functionality and utility across subject areas. Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) argue that most students know Tier 1 words and that Tier 3 words should be taught at point of contact, or as they occur in reading. Tier 2 words often appear in student texts, so they are words that can add most to students' language knowledge and curriculum access and participation. They allow students to talk and write about subjects descriptively and with more specific detail. Words selected for explicit instruction should be Tier 2 and academic words drawn from the curriculum.

Creating a rich oral language environment

Research findings (Beck, McKeown and Kucan 2013) point to the need to create classrooms that support and encourage sophisticated word usage through a rich oral language environment characterised by:

- multiple encounters with Tier 2 vocabulary in a variety of contexts;
- explicitly taught word meanings using clear, consistent and understandable language;
- rich and extensive opportunities to practise new words that promote deep processing and more complex levels of understanding;
- ample structured reviews to revisit learned words within and across lessons;
- numerous opportunities to reinforce vocabulary through wide independent reading; and
- nurturing an appreciation for words and how they are used.

Next steps

For more information, contact your school speech language pathologist or the Reading and Writing Disorders Advisory Service. The Advisory Service may be accessed by telephone or email on weekdays between 8:30am and 4:30pm.

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