Fostering a New Approach to Vocabulary, 30 Years in the Making

The year was 2006, my (Robert) first year as an English teacher at North Branford High School, and the curriculum documents were clear. Teach three vocabulary units—20 words per unit—each marking period, twelve units a year for a total of 240 words. Quiz students after each unit; test after three.

The year was 1999, and Megan Lee, my coauthor, colleague, and North Branford alumnus, was a ninth grader in high school, and her English teacher’s syllabus was clear. She would complete three vocabulary units per marking period, twelve in the year; she would be quizzed and tested on 240 words during the year.

The year was 1986 and Cindy Genzano, our most senior English teacher, was distributing vocabulary workbooks to her students at the start of the year; did she know (could she imagine) that she would be distributing the same books 30 years later? In fact, no one in our department knows for sure how long we had been using the vocabulary workshop books before we decided to finally make a change last school year.

Our approach was nuclear—expose students to as many words as possible—but the signs of a fallout were ubiquitous. Students were not engaged; the answers to the workbook activities were readily available in a variety of places online, and it was just too easy (or too tempting) for students to copy answers rather than actually engage in the activities. Teachers were inconsistent; even though the expectations were clear, few teachers were actually able to meet that expectation, especially given the many other mandates, directives, and initiatives competing for their time. Those who did, the most regimented of us, did so at the expense of teaching and learning, as they typically moved so quickly through the units that students did not learn the words. Assessment performance was also consistently below average; standardized assessment data from Smarter Balanced and iReady to the PSAT and SAT consistently showed vocabulary and understanding words in context as one of our highest areas of need. Nevertheless, complacency persisted. A system was in place. The workbooks were in the bookroom. Did we really want to tackle this problem when we had so many other things to do?

Megan Lee’s story catalyzed us:

In the winter of 2001, after hours of study and preparation, I failed my tenth-grade English midterm. There is a reason why this still resonates—and it’s not because I’m now an English teacher—it’s because it was the first moment that I felt helpless in a classroom.

Inadvertent. Adventitious. Irrevocable. Repudiate. I painstakingly wrote out notecard after notecard on my bedroom floor, placing each 3 x 5 white rectangle into a precise stack. As the pile grew taller it became my albatross and my white whale. I struggled most with the “I” words: immutable, impugn, ignoble, inauspicious, incontrovertible, implicit, incisive, imperious, invective. The more I tried to retain, the more the words became indecipherable from each other. Helplessness crept into...
my mind, and my studying efforts went unrewarded. Though I had performed sufficiently on the other components of the exam, my difficulty with vocabulary sunk my overall grade. When I was hired to work at my alma mater, I gathered the same skinny red paperbacks and passed them out to my students on the first day of school. Diligently, I followed the rules as they were prescribed. And, during that first year, unsurprisingly, many of my students struggled with vocabulary. It is very easy, from the front of the classroom, to say: Well, the students just aren’t studying. If students didn’t spend so much time (insert: texting, on social media, playing sports, talking in class, snap chatting) then they’d do better on our assessments. But, I knew firsthand that student apathy and effort weren’t the only scapegoats. I knew there was something fundamentally missing from our approach. As the year progressed, I began to ruminate on that old stack of notecards from my past; in particular I reflected on the “I” words that had caused me such angst. I realized that I couldn’t learn those words because, at the time, I did not truly understand how words worked. Those “I” words were just words that started with the same letter, not words with similar prefixes and recognizable roots. Had I studied the words and not simply the definitions, perhaps I would have had greater success. I knew I had to do something to prevent my students from feeling that same failure.

We were convinced that we needed to change, but to lead our department members through that change, we knew we needed to show them that our proposed changes were not whimsical or emotionally biased. What we proposed had to be grounded in research. We synthesized our research into six essential understandings gleaned from a variety of sources (see Beck; Benjamin and Hugelmeyer; Hattie; Jenkins et al.; Marzano; McLaughlin; NRTAC; and Pikulski and Templeton). Consistently, studies show strong correlations between vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and achievement; vocabulary instruction and knowledge of the meaning of words, in general, positively affect comprehension and achievement. Research endorses the following:

- Both direct and indirect vocabulary instruction whereby students are presented with definitional and contextual information as well as imagery-based representations
- The importance, in general, of cultivating wide reading, including through such practices as sustained silent reading or free voluntary reading during class time coupled with active participation in learning new vocabulary
- Repeated and multiple exposures to words in context; Joseph Jenkins et al., in particular, found that for students to familiarize themselves with a word simply through context they needed to “be exposed to [new vocabulary] six times before they have enough experience with it to ascertain and remember its meaning” (qtd. in Marzano, “Direct Vocabulary” 55)
- The use of technology to help effectively teach vocabulary
- Connecting student experience and prior knowledge with word acquisition
- Active engagement of students in the word-learning process

Our survey of neighboring schools revealed, perhaps obviously, that one approach does not fit all. We heard back from four of the other twelve schools in our conference. Two schools also use workbooks and have an expectation in place that a certain number of units from each workbook are completed during the year. On the opposite side of the spectrum, one school reported that they do not use workbooks at all; instead, vocabulary is taught at the discretion of each teacher through the context...
of course readings. Another school indicated that they also do not use workbooks, and instead recently established core vocabulary lists for each grade level of 100 words each. In short, though we would have liked to receive feedback from more of our neighbors, the four schools that responded provided a fairly diverse portrait of possibilities: stick with our current program, abandon it completely in favor of vocabulary in context, or abandon the books but still maintain a common list of words for each grade level. While these approaches run the gamut, they liberated our thinking, as we did not feel compelled to follow any one model; we felt free to make a decision that worked best for us and our circumstances and experiences.

We had ample anecdotal evidence from teachers that suggested that students were not performing as well as they should on vocabulary-related assessments, but surprisingly little standardized data to evaluate. We had measures available, such as common exams, Gates MacGinitie, iReady, and Smarter Balanced, but these assessments were not in place long enough or administered consistently enough for us to consider them reliable. In the end, the only consistent standardized data we could effectively evaluate came from the College Board's Summary of Answers and Skills Reports provided to us after each administration of the PSAT. Nearly all of our students take the PSAT in tenth and eleventh grades, and the College Board's report showed year after year that our students only answered about 50 percent of questions related to determining the meaning of words correctly, and worse, they did not improve significantly in their ability to do this between tenth and eleventh grades. The one outlier for this was the class of 2016, but as Figure 1 shows, student performance for this one indicator has been stagnant for years.

**FIGURE 1. PSAT Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Year</th>
<th>Eleventh Grade</th>
<th>Tenth Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2013</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2014</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2015</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2016</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Granted, the PSAT/SAT has been redesigned, and understanding “relevant words in context,” as the College Board now calls it, represents only about 20 percent of the total questions in the reading and writing section, down from 33–35 percent in the old PSAT/SAT. But, for us, this was not about improving standardized test performance so much as showing our teachers that students were not improving in an important skill despite the vocabulary curriculum we had in place.

We presented our findings to the six other members of our department at a meeting in the last half of the 2015–16 school year and ultimately settled on a synthesis of ideas. Megan Lee shared her story, and in addition to sharing the information provided in this article, we provided teachers a chance to discuss their feelings. Our approach was transformational. While we went into the meeting with proposals in mind, we were careful not to prescribe; we felt the best method was to have an open discussion first. Common ground was established fairly quickly on a few key points: everyone agreed that we could not adequately teach 240 words during the school year, most felt that teaching vocabulary through the context of course readings was more effective than teaching it through a separate curriculum, and most agreed that in the current digital age, we could not use the workbook activities without devoting significant class time to them, which most were reluctant to do. Several teachers also felt that it was important to teach students skills related to vocabulary acquisition, especially word roots, so that they might be better equipped to figure out the meaning of words. To be fair, many also lamented the potential loss of our workbooks. After all, decades were on the chopping block, and committing to a change would mean committing to the development of new lessons, activities, and assessments.

Through this inclusive, collaborative, and open process, a two-pronged plan emerged. We would cut down on the required number of words and establish a system, like the system in place at one of our neighboring schools, of 100 core words each year. The 100 words would connect to word roots. The idea of reducing the overall number of words taught was not listed in our six essential understandings, but Julie Faulkner and Deanne Sovereen provide perspectives on how this can be successful; likewise, we did not list teaching roots.
as an essential understanding, but Isabel Beck and colleagues’ work and Amy Benjamin and Michael Hugelmeier’s *Big Skills for the Common Core: Literacy Strategies for the 6–12 Classroom*, which references Beck, make strong cases for this approach. In addition, the words would follow students through high school; the 100 words in ninth grade would continue into tenth and then into eleventh. So, while we would significantly reduce the overall number of words from 240 a year to 100 (720 words over three years to 300), we would significantly increase the repetition and exposure to our core vocabulary. The second side of our strategy would put increased emphasis on vocabulary in context. We would come together to create activities and lessons connected to the core texts and units of our curriculum that all teachers would share and use.

The most successful aspect of our new approach is that we are talking about vocabulary again. Grade-level teachers meet every other Wednesday after school to coordinate their teaching, and a considerable amount of this time is now devoted to the development of new learning activities and instructional strategies to support vocabulary instruction. In our meetings, we discuss what is working and what is less successful, and we borrow ideas from one another and abandon ideas when they fall flat. What is most important is that we are actively seeking to foster a positive change in the way our students learn, and we are doing it together, rejuvenating a previously lackluster program.

Some of the activities and strategies that we are most proud of from our first year of implementation include the following:

- **Embedded Vocabulary:** In ninth grade the list of 100 words was divided across the five curricular units. In doing this, teachers made meaningful connections to the vocabulary words in each class—not just when it was time to pass out the list of words. When Romeo ascended Juliet’s balcony, we began our class learning the root “am-” and the words “enamored” and “amicable”; as Bob Ewell sat before Judge Taylor to provide his testimony in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the students had just reviewed “jur-” and “perjury.”

- **Visual Representations and Organizers:** While we embedded the vocabulary into the curriculum, we also wanted students to be active participants in the learning process. As new words were introduced, students would segment the word into recognizable parts (root, prefix and/or suffix), identify synonyms and antonyms, and create image-based representations of the word. To better understand the connection between the root and their words, students created classroom word walls that organized the words by root or, on a smaller scale, students created root word wheels (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

- **Vocabulary Logs and Independent Reading:** We have always had independent reading, but we now put increased emphasis on low-stakes assessments and student choice, practices consistent with research. Several teachers also explored sustained silent reading in classes for struggling readers, and several also now require students to keep an active vocabulary log. From an instructional standpoint, this was not novel, but students soon were using the words in class discussions, in small groups, and in their own writing.

- **Vocabulary in the Real World:** With the increased emphasis on understanding words in context, a common new assignment using Google News emerged. Students were instructed to search Google News and compile examples of the words used in articles and headlines. This activity fostered mean-
meaningful discussions about the real-world relevance and application of their vocabulary lists, while also providing teachers with resources to create additional vocabulary in context activities. A popular activity was “Fill in the Headline,” in which excerpts from articles were analyzed to figure out what vocabulary word was most likely used in the title of the article.

At the end of the year, our teachers met collectively to review a variety of topics, one of which was our new approach to vocabulary. Two themes emerged from those meetings. The first is that our teachers did not feel that students were making the connections between the words and their roots. The “word parts” concept was a departure from what they were familiar with, and thus it required a bit more direct instruction and explanation at the onset of the year for the process to be most effective. Heidi Ahlstrom-Miller, another member of our department, lamented that students who already struggled with vocabulary sometimes “can grasp context use and application of whole words better than they can retain roots and prefixes.” In essence, for some students, our refined approach added another layer to an already difficult concept. The other theme was time. Many teachers noted the significant amount of time it took to develop new learning activities and in general, to develop the curriculum. Cindy Genzano summed it up well: “It just takes a lot of time. In the beginning of the year, I used a lot of my prep time to think of interesting ways to integrate our vocabulary lists along with the literature or to provide students with real world connections to the words. As the year progressed, it became harder and harder to find the time to do this.” No one came out and said they wanted to go back to the workbooks, but in making our vocabulary program more authentic and relevant to us—in lieu of adopting a book—we necessarily took on a significant amount of work. This should lessen in time, but this is also a huge positive in that now our vocabulary curriculum and its learning activities have become a living document that we constantly review, discuss, and modify, as opposed to the fixed workbooks of the past.

Initial feedback from students has also been positive. Eighty percent of our students participated in a survey at the end of the year related to our new approach. Eighty-eight percent of respondents...
 indicated that the number of words they know and use while they read, write, and speak improved and increased; 79 percent indicated that they have a better understanding of how words are related to their roots; and 86 percent said that their ability to figure out the meaning of words while reading improved. Two questions had more mixed results. When asked how many of the words they learned this year they would remember for years to come, 70 percent indicated that they would remember “Some,” which we defined for them as about 50 percent. We do not have anything to compare this against, because we did not conduct a survey with our previous approach to vocabulary, but with a reduction in the overall number of words, we were hoping that more students would indicate that they would remember “Most,” which we defined for them as about 75 percent. (Only 18 percent indicated that they would remember “Most.”) Our plan is to have the words continue with students as they progress through grade levels, so that should mitigate the results of that question. When asked explicitly if they agree with our switch in approach from using workbooks, 52 percent agreed and only 6 percent disagreed, but 42 percent were neutral, meaning that they felt their vocabulary improved about the same as when we used the workbooks. This can be viewed in different ways. In one sense, our students seem split. About half liked the change, but the other half would have been fine regardless. A more positive spin is to say that 94 percent are content.

We know firsthand that change is not easy—especially when it means challenging 30 years of precedent—and our greatest challenge now will be to maintain the momentum. Our new approach is embedded with research-based practices and founded on a shared vision, its inception and practice were enhanced by meaningful collaboration, and, most of all, its content is rich with authentic, relevant, real-world vocabulary. But, before we could foster that change, we knew we needed to be transformational leaders. Our success hinged on not only our department’s commitment to change but also their collaboration. Working together toward a shared common goal—though not always easy—has strengthened our professional commitment to one another. Our choices throughout this process, the changes that have been made, and the improvements we will continue to make will ultimately create students who are better readers, writers, and thinkers—and isn’t that why we do this teaching thing in the first place?

Works Cited


Marzano, Robert J. Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement. ASCD, 2004.


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The Word Matrix is a tool designed to assist teachers in vocabulary instruction, but it has flexible applications in literary analysis and writing instruction as well. The interactive tool can be used to teach students the concepts of connotation and register; to help clarify differences between seemingly similar words; to explore the concept of diction in literary analysis; or to encourage more precision in word choice in student writing. http://bit.ly/2zTtYgv