How Can Teachers Increase Classroom Use of Academic Vocabulary?

My seventh-grade students are in their seats, shifting their gazes between the large poster paper hanging on the white board, the colored markers in my hand, and the timer. The prefix *re-* is written on top of the page. As soon as I give my class the signal, hands shoot into the air, calling out words such as “rewrite, repost, redraw, reform” during a collective 10-minute brainstorm.

Students suggest words and I add them to the growing list, if they properly use the prefix. At the end of 10 minutes, we count our words; it is a great list.

At this point, I explain, “Once you learned the prefix *re-*, you packed your word bank.” (See Fig 1.) Then I flip through the posters from other classes and point out, “Yet, you still did not think of all the words other classes found. Once you understand word parts, you have access to an incredible number of words.” My students argued, “Ms. Dixon, why are we learning vocabulary in social studies?” I watched as my students looked at each of the lists, the class word wall, and back at me. I saw them realize what I had been trying to explain: active vocabulary practice is invaluable to their academic success. Why? Because active vocabulary practice helps young adolescent learners develop academic language and access academic texts.

As social studies teachers, one teaching in a rural middle school and one teaching in an urban middle school, we value “rich vocabulary instruction” (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002, p. 108). Given that our students are encountering increasingly academic texts in our classrooms, this type of instruction is exactly what they need in order to access those texts. Our students represent typical rural and urban populations from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and we see national achievement trends for these groups playing out in our classrooms. Since the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) began measuring reading achievement in 1992, the nation’s fourth and eighth graders have shown little to no growth (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Recently, our state adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. CCSS promises to increase the rigors of reading. With the evidence that students have difficulty with academic language, the new standards have the potential to further amplify the literacy gap.

A critical component to academic reading comprehension is understanding the vocabulary,
and gaps in vocabulary knowledge are a factor for low reading achievement (Harmon, Hendrick, & Wood, 2006; Kelley, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Faller, 2010; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010). In order to make sense of increasingly dense academic texts, middle-level students must possess strategies to understand and use words, which will, with other types of text-based support, increase comprehension. For these reasons, academic vocabulary has received a great deal of attention in both the research and practitioner literature (see Baumann & Graves, 2010, for an overview). However, for our purposes, it is the definition provided by Flynt and Brozo (2008) that is most applicable to the classroom; academic vocabulary is “word knowledge that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are valued in school” (p. 500).

What Is Effective Academic Vocabulary Instruction?

As part of an action research project, we examined and supplemented our practice for helping our students build academic vocabulary knowledge. Our research question for the project was based on Blachowicz and Fisher’s (2000) assertion that students should be responsible for taking an active role in learning new vocabulary words. Active engagement means “learning the meaning of specific words (where it is important to make connections between and among words and concepts), and learning strategies to become independent word learners” (p. 505). Therefore, our purpose for this project was to answer the question: How can we enhance young adolescents’ active engagement with academic vocabulary while engaging with texts in our social studies classes?

To start, we built a common understanding of academic vocabulary words, considering both general academic words and content-specific words. For general academic word knowledge, we relied on Coxhead’s (2000) work. She created a list of 560 academic vocabulary word families consisting of thousands of terms students would most likely see across content areas. However, this list was never intended as a prescriptive list of words to teach, and we did not use it that way. Rather, we used the list as a guide for the type of word we wanted to attend to as we encountered them in the texts we were reading. For example, *proceed*, a word from the list, can mean to move forward, and *proceeds* can indicate the money received from an economic venture. Different forms of this word can be found in many other content areas, often with varying meanings.

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Word Walls

Word walls provide visual support for all learners in their acquisition of academic vocabulary. Corson (1997) tells us that “words are only fully learned when they are available for active use” (p. 699). We learned that it is important when creating a word wall that the words are terms students...
have created and manipulated, not simply words up for display (Fisher & Frey, 2008). The organization of word walls varies; some walls arrange terms in alphabetical order, some use common themes or units of study (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Yates, Cuthrell, & Rose, 2011).

In creating our word walls, we engaged students in decisions about the placement of the words according to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan’s (2002) tiers (see Fig. 2). Our students were already comfortable with these categories from our previous work together. Tier 1 words are basic, everyday vocabulary; Tier 2 words are similar to general academic words; and Tier 3 words equate with content-specific words. The discussions about where words belonged provided students with the opportunity to deepen their ownership of the words. We also found that simple prompts for entry and exit slips were time-efficient ways to help students pay attention to and use word wall words. Examples of entry slip prompts are:

- Write down the words _____, _____, and _____ from our word wall and, with a partner, write down everything you think you know about them.
- Here are two questions we’ll be answering today: Which word wall words do you think will be most important in today’s lesson? Why?

Examples of exit slip prompts are:

- Write down one new thing you learned today and use at least two of our word wall words in your response.
- Look around at our word walls. Which words were the most important from today’s lesson? What makes those words important today?

**Morphology Practice with Matching Activities**

Morphology, the study of word structure, including roots, bases, and affixes, is an extremely powerful tool for building academic language proficiency. The majority of the words on Coxhead’s (2000) list are complex in nature, as are many social studies content area words. Consider, for example, the terms *civil disobedience*, *jurisdiction*, *communism*, and *revolution*. The activity illustrated at the beginning of our article is one way we engaged our young adolescent learners in building word structure knowledge (see Fig. 1). Another activity we found particularly engaging for students is a matching activity (Townsend, 2009).

Each student received a slip of paper that had something in common, morphologically, with two other stu-
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dents’ slips of paper. For example, the words may have had the same Latin root or the same prefix. Students circulated around the room, with a time limit, to find their group members. Once groups were assembled, each group used textbooks and dictionaries to determine the meanings of their common word parts. Each group then generated additional words using their word parts and taught another group about the new terms. Building students’ word awareness in this manner broadened their vocabulary knowledge without explicit instruction of each individual word. Such awareness-building plays “an important role in vocabulary growth which in turn impacts reading comprehension” (Nagy, Berninger, & Abbott, 2006, p. 134). And, as with all activities, the target words and word parts for the morphological activities were instructionally meaningful for the texts we were engaging with at the time.

Word Sorts

Word sorts can engage middle-level students in finding similarities and differences in word structures and word meanings (Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2010). One example of a word sort involved students receiving (or making!) a set of slips of paper, each with a term related to the Civil War. Students then sorted their terms into “people,” “places,” “events” or other self-selected categories. This particular sort included the category “military words.” We were then able to assess a student’s understanding of an individual word, such as Copperheads (see Fig. 3), by asking him to justify his category choices, thus uncovering misconceptions to be explored.

Word sorts can also be used to further awareness of morphology (Templeton, et al., 2010). For example, in the same unit, emancipation was analyzed for its root “man,” and students made connections to words like manacle and mandate. Students then practiced with word sorts comprised of Civil War terms that shared common roots or affixes.

Vocabulary Journals

Vocabulary journals in content areas allow adolescent students to work with vocabulary terms using an “introduce, define, discuss, and apply” sequence (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p. 67). The variations in the set-up of the journal reflect the needs of individual content areas.

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![Figure 3. Example of a student’s word sort](image-url)
continued to construct more knowledge (see Fig. 4). Word learning is incremental in nature, and depth of word knowledge is built as students encounter words across various texts and contexts. Therein lays the power of vocabulary journals; students can revisit words, adding information about those words as they learn new nuances of and contexts for those words. Every page or section of a vocabulary journal then authentically grows as students’ word knowledge grows.

**Conclusion**

Active academic vocabulary practice helps middle-level students actively engage with and use the challenging academic language of the content areas. The strategies we have included are only a few of the ones used successfully in word study. Other successful strategies may include student discussions, role plays, jeopardy-esque games, flash cards, comic strips, acrostic poems, and a plethora of other writing assignments.

After working with the prefix re-, the social studies class mentioned above studied Reconstruction. Drawing the students’ attention to the word reconstruction was built into the introduction to this unit. Based on the students’ prior understanding of the prefix re-, they were able to infer what we would learn while studying America’s reconstruction of the South. This was not a separate vocabulary lesson, but rather a quick review and application check for understanding that we slipped right into our daily instruction. Focused vocabulary instruction is not about cutting curriculum or extending teachers’ instructional day; rather, we learned from this action research project that it is about embedding a strategic, focused vocabulary curriculum, centered on meaningful words and word parts from our texts, into our lessons.

**References**


CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITE THINK

Word Matrix Student Interactive Tool

The Word Matrix is a tool from ReadWriteThink.org 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://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/word-matrix-30071.html

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