Effective Ways of Building Vocabulary in Every Content Area

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One of the important responsibilities of any teacher at any level is that of planning a sequential program of vocabulary development in each and every area of the curriculum. Vocabulary enlargement must be seen as being a part of the major language arts curriculum of every school in all content departments. All teaching which deals with oral and written words involves concept formation and hence additional words and phrases with their attendant meanings.

There is a definite relationship between vocabulary and comprehension since the ability to comprehend printed material is dependent upon a thorough understanding of the meaning of general and specialized words which occur in each content area. All learners possess five different kinds or types of vocabularies.

KINDS OF VOCABULARY

The first major type of vocabulary which a young child acquires is *listening* vocabulary. Gradually, the learner develops a *speaking* vocabulary through imitation of words and phrases learned from other family members. Upon entering school, he starts the formation of his *reading* vocabulary through extended experiences utilizing various word attack skills. Gradually a *writing* vocabulary is established after a firm grasp of the meaning of words has been constructed. One's *potential* vocabulary includes all those words or phrases which could be understood when using many diverse word attack and comprehension techniques.

Many educators have come to believe that there is a high degree of relationship between level of vocabulary and mental as well as reading ability. The development of a good mind means a good vocabulary and a good vocabulary means a good mind according to (Dale and O'Rourke, 1971). They contend that it is more accurate to say that they are interactive each is an inseparable part of the background and abilities of the learner.

Teachers in every content area (especially at the upper grade and high school levels) have an important responsibility for building the reading, writing, and potential vocabulary levels of each student. These skills cannot be developed in an incidental or haphazard manner. A part of every class period should be designated for vocabulary activities which are developed in a meaningful setting utilizing books and other materials which are at the instructional reading levels of the learners involved.

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING VOCABULARY

There are numerous ways of building vocabulary which are natural outgrowths of innovative teaching practices. Some of these are described in the following sections.

1. During the pre-reading or readiness stage of every reading assignment, much attention should be given to the new and unfamiliar words or phrases which occur in the printed material. The number and kinds of words should be restricted to the learning and interest levels of the students. A pre-test of word meanings (involving multiple choice or matching exercises) can be administered to gain an impression relative to the depth of instruction which may be needed. A cloze test involving the completion of every fifth word which has been left out of a selection may be administered. This should provide valuable data for deciding words to be taught. Each teacher should determine that the final words selected are indeed key concepts which are vital to the understanding of the subject material presented.

   Each word or phrase should always be placed in context in a sentence since many words in the English language have multiple meanings depending on the contextual patterns of the affected sentence (e.g. read, refuse). Audio and visual experiences using pictures, filmstrips, films, and drawings which illustrate the meaning of words should prove helpful to many students.

2. The use of learning activity packages may be appropriate for building vocabulary in the content areas. The four major parts may consist of behavioral objectives; a series of questions to be answered; a type of learning project (such as the use of a media device); and evaluation procedures. In other words, the teacher *establishes* the new vocabulary to be learned, *how* it is to be learned, and *whether*, in fact, it is learned. The evaluation step could consist of such tools as a completion of multiple-choice test; performing an actual demonstration which proves knowledge of designated words; or writing an essay examination.

3. Another effective way of building vocabulary is through the use of programmed materials. These programs can be either teacher-made or commercial in nature. New words and phrases can be presented in small units or frames with a corresponding set of definitions or synonyms. The student scores each frame and can check immediately to see if he or she is right. There are numerous programmed software of a commercial nature which are useful for building vocabulary. Examples of these materials would be *Programmed Vocabulary* (Appleton-Century-Crofts) and *Spectrum of Skills* (Macmillan).

4. Some students are motivated to build vocabulary through the formation of a vocabulary notebook. They are to record new words, phrases, and concepts with the correct spelling, pronunciation, and meaning for each word. Appropriate illustrations for various sections of the notebook may prove to be an interesting and innovative activity for selected students.

5. Vocabulary development can be greatly enhanced through the systematic correct use of the dictionary. All students should understand that the dictionary is a complex work and the different aspects such as diacritical markings, multiple meanings, and preferred pronunciations should be explained and illustrated. A small dictionary should be available for every student for use with those words which are strange and unfamiliar.

6. The study of roots, prefixes, and suffixes can be invaluable in building vocabulary. (Stauffer, 1942) found that 24 per cent of the first 20,000 words in the Thorndike list have prefixes. For example, the reader should understand that "ab" means *from*; "con" means *with*; "pre" means *before;* and "trans" means *across*. A similar knowledge of suffixes and roots should help the learner derive a high level of meaning with respect to hundreds of words.

7. Crossword puzzles which are teacher-made and correlated with specific reading assignments can be stimulating and useful for students. The completion of such activities may be made easier for less motivated readers by providing a scrambled list of the intended words. Matching exercises involving words and their definitions may be valuable for specific reading assignments.

SUMMARY

There is a high degree of relationship between level of vocabulary and mental and reading abilities. All content teachers should understand that there are five different types of vocabulary. Many lessons and strategies which have been described in this article should be employed to help students in building overall vocabulary abilities.

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