How to Select Words for Vocabulary Instruction

By Francine Johnston

People reading To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960) encounter words such as predilection, taciturn, chattel, malevolent, and assuage. Teachers and students using biology textbooks encounter words such as lipid, cytoplasm, plastid, and homeostasis. And teachers and students using social studies textbooks encounter words such as fascism, indigenous, partition, and apartheid. No wonder teaching vocabulary can seem overwhelming to English Language Arts (ELA) and content area teachers. There are so many words and so little time!

You can flip through any book and find likely candidates for vocabulary instruction. Selecting words to teach is not difficult, but it's important to remember that there's only so much new vocabulary students can learn in depth—and recall over time. So how do you decide which words are the best words to teach?

Before describing criteria for selecting words for vocabulary instruction, let's consider several different ways in which words can be categorized. One way is to think of receptive vocabulary and expressive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary comprises words we understand when we encounter them while reading or listening. Expressive vocabulary comprises words we are comfortable using when writing or speaking. Typically our receptive vocabularies are much larger than our expressive vocabularies, but individual words fall on a continuum from: (1) Never saw it, (2) Heard it but don't know what it means, (3) Recognize it in context, know something about it, to (4) Know it well, and can define and use it (Dale, 1965). Effective vocabulary instruction should move words along this continuum.

While it is helpful to consider how well known particular words might be, there are other ways of categorizing vocabulary when making instructional decisions about what words to teach (Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2010). One way of categorizing vocabulary that has become well established with educators and researchers describes three tiers of words (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002). The Common Core English Language Arts Standards (2010) also include three categories: conversational vocabulary, general academic vocabulary, and domain-specific vocabulary. Because these two frameworks are similar, they will be described together in more detail.

Conversational vocabulary These are the basic words of everyday life that children acquire from talking with family and friends. These words should not require formal attention in school (unless students are learning English). Beck et al. call these Tier 1 words. Examples include food, cereal, lucky, and watch.

General academic vocabulary These words are encountered in reading materials and are likely to be familiar to mature language users. They are used in many contexts and/or across multiple domains, and are words that students in the upper grades should use in their writing. Beck et al. call these Tier 2 words. Examples include provisions, porridge, fortunate, and gape. General academic words are good instructional candidates for the ELA teacher
because they are likely to be found in novels, essays, short stories, and poetry. These words often name familiar concepts, and instruction can focus on helping students learn a new label for them. For example, the word *gape* might be a new term, but the idea of watching something with your mouth open is a familiar concept.

**Domain-specific vocabulary** Fields of study such as art, mathematics, science, and social studies each have a specific vocabulary. Students need to acquire these vocabularies in order to understand the content of the various disciplines. These vocabulary words can be challenging because students may lack the conceptual background that is needed. For example, teaching the word *fascism* requires building an understanding with examples and explanations. Domain-specific words need to be taught by teachers of a particular subject and may never be encountered outside that class or discipline. These words are called Tier 3 by Beck et al., and would include words such as *autocracy*, *cytoplasm*, and *homeostasis*.

**Criteria for Selection**

A number of educators (e.g., Graves, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006) agree that there are three criteria that can help you whittle down word lists to make your vocabulary instruction more manageable: (1) importance, (2) transferability to other disciplines, and (3) usefulness for generative studies. In order to consider these three criteria, teachers must consider the context in which they occur.

1. **Importance** How important is it for students to know or learn particular words in order to understand a selection (Flanigan & Greenwood, 2007)? Words might already be familiar, or the context may support understanding of them. Such words are good candidates for brief discussion during or after reading if they are interesting or new, but they need not be studied in depth. For example, the word *spigot* may be unfamiliar to students in the northern United States, but the meaning is clear when used in context: “There’s a water spigot in the shower.” (*Holes*, p. 20) This is an example of a word that might simply be mentioned since it is another label for a concept that students already understand; it is a straightforward synonym for *tap* or *faucet*.

Other words might not be supported by context but do not need to be taught in depth. For example, the meaning of *barren* is not clear in this sentence from *Holes* (Sachar, 1998): “The land was barren and desolate” (p. 11). However, not knowing the meaning of *barren* will probably not interfere with comprehension. On the other hand, *perseverance* is an important word to teach if you are using *Holes* because it reflects the theme of the book and helps describe the traits of key characters.

2. **Transferability** Will the word in question be useful in other contexts? Another way to think about this is frequency: Does the word occur across other academic domains? Might it be used in other novels? There is a general consensus that it is not a good use of instructional time to teach rare words. For example, the word *asafoetida* (a pungent gum resin sometimes used for medicinal purposes) shows up in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but students may not encounter the word again for years. On the other hand, the word *predatory*, which appears in *Holes*, is also likely to show up in science, social studies, and the evening news.

If you, a reasonably well-read classroom teacher with a college degree, shake your head and say, “I
never heard of that word,” then it is probably not a general academic vocabulary word and, thus, not a good candidate for in-depth instruction. It might be a word you define briefly or ask a student to look up out of curiosity, but don’t hold students responsible for learning words they may never see again. Students are as jealous of their time as you are, and learning rare words like asafoetida may very well feel like a waste of time to them.

A number of researchers have looked at the occurrence of words across different content areas in Grades 4 through 12 to identify academic vocabulary needed by students. The Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) and the General Service List and its adaptations (West, 1953) have been widely used in teaching learners of English as a second language, but the words are applicable for all learners. ELA teachers might want to refer to these resources to find words that are particularly useful to teach.

3. Usefulness for generative studies Does the word you’re thinking about teaching have a root, base word, or affix that lends itself to the study of related words? For example, the word malevolent has the root mal and is related by meaning and spelling to malignant, malicious, malady, maltreatment, malnutrition, and many other words that can appear in a variety of contexts. Knowing that the root mal suggests something bad or evil can help students unlock the meanings of many words.

Teachers of both ELA and content area subjects can help students make important links between words derived from Greek and Latin—words that form the basis for much of the general academic vocabulary and domain-specific vocabulary students need to learn. Social studies teachers, for example, should help students see the relationship between partition and apartheid, both of which are derived from the base word “part,” or point out the common suffix -ism in fascism, capitalism, communism, and socialism, words that name and help describe systems of belief or worldviews. This kind of word study not only makes it easier to remember such words, but also helps students understand the generative nature of English, which takes word parts and combines them in different ways to create new words.

These three criteria can help you make decisions about which words are good candidates for in-depth vocabulary instruction. Ideally, words should meet two or three of the above-stated criteria, but there are certainly no hard and fast rules and your own judgment is, as always, of paramount importance.

References

See Word Selection for Vocabulary Their Way: Words and Strategies for Academic Success on p. T33 of this Teacher Edition for information about how words were selected for this program.