
Word Study: Effective Language and Vocabulary Instruction in a Balanced Literacy Classroom

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Introduction

A significant gap exists between grade-level expectations and the vocabulary knowledge that some students bring to the primary grades. The gap widens as these students progress through higher grades. Students who lack adequate vocabulary and word decoding skills have difficulty interpreting meaning from what they read. This contributes to the reading proficiency gap between good readers and poor readers, including how readily students can integrate new vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

In a comprehensive balanced literacy classroom, well-sequenced foundational skills instruction with frequent and built-in monitoring, assessments, and careful attention to students' fluency are essential to meet the text complexity demands of today's rigorous College and Career Readiness Standards.

Word study should provide students with rich and meaningful immersion with phonics, phonemic awareness, concepts of print, high-frequency words, spelling, and vocabulary as appropriate for grade-level standards and individual students' needs.

What Is Word Study?

Word study is generally defined as phonemic awareness and phonics, plus spelling and vocabulary instruction. It is multifaceted and based on learning word patterns rather than on memorizing disconnected words. As students acquire these skills, they go through distinct stages of development, particularly for spelling.

Many approaches to spelling and vocabulary acquisition previously used taught words in isolation, away from phonics and phonemic awareness instruction. The term word study refers to an integrated, connected approach to instruction.

It is also important to note that word study includes the ever-important study of high-frequency words. In order to read and write fluently with comprehension and meaning, children must be able to automatically read and spell the most frequently encountered words. As the amount of words that students know and can read increases, so will their speed and comprehension (Cunningham, 2000).

Instructional Shifts: A New Emphasis on Word Study

Instructional practice in the area of word study has shifted in response to current standards. Several of the main shifts are described below.

1. Extension into Grades 4–5

One instructional shift is the extension of foundational literacy skills to Grades 4 and 5. The recommendations of the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) indicate that important foundational skills should continue to develop in elementary school beyond K–2. As a result, advanced decoding, word analysis, and practice with multisyllabic words in support of vocabulary development are included across the grade span. Although word study has a new emphasis in the intermediate grades, in both the primary and intermediate grades there is a simultaneous focus on both skills and meaning making.

2. Simultaneous Versus Sequential Focus

The simultaneous, as opposed to sequential, focus on foundational skills and reading comprehension represents a second instructional shift. According to Dr. Tim Shanahan (2014) “Learning to read is a multidimensional pursuit. Lots of things have to happen simultaneously. Teachers are always teaching words (decoding and meaning), fluency, comprehension, and writing — not one after the other but simultaneously. Kids who are learning to decode should also be learning the cadences of text and how to think about what they read. All at the same time.”

Today’s standards recognize that foundational skills are literally the “foundation” of the K–12 back-mapped pathway to college and career readiness. Foundational skills are those which teach students to learn to read on their own and make it possible for them to comprehend efficiently the progressively more rigorous text and vocabulary that they will encounter in school, college, and career.

3. Focus on Academic Vocabulary

Systematic language development is also emphasized with a strong explicit focus on vocabulary, especially academic vocabulary. Academic vocabulary includes words that are not commonly used in conversational speech but that appear commonly in written form across a variety of subject areas. A strong academic vocabulary is key to strong reading comprehension. These words are often referred to as Tier 2 words.

A focus on vocabulary development is recognized as critical because researchers have identified gaps in academic and domain-specific vocabulary knowledge as factors contributing to weak reading comprehension in upper elementary and secondary grades (Kosanovich, Reed, & Miller, 2010; Kamil et al., 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007).

These shifts underscore the importance of integrating word study into whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction in the balanced literacy classroom.

Vocabulary: Choosing Words and How to Teach Them

Vocabulary is a significant area of curriculum for which teachers are held accountable. Research has shown that vocabulary and reading comprehension, as well as vocabulary and academic performance in all content areas, are strongly related (NRP, 2000).

In word study, the true challenge comes in choosing exactly which words to teach, how to teach them, and how long to spend on them. Hiebert (2006) describes three general criteria for determining which words to choose for intensive teaching.

1. Choose words needed to comprehend the text fully.
2. Choose words likely to appear in future texts from any discipline.
3. Choose words that are part of a word family or semantic network.

Biemiller's research (2010) demonstrates that words that can be explained quickly should be explained in the moment of encounter. The explanation will enhance and not impede comprehension because it will be swift and unobtrusive.

Words that can be taught in *context* often include the following:

- Concrete or literal words describing things that can be experienced through the five senses
- Words with single meanings
- Words with meaning or shades of meaning that are likely already part of the students' experiences

Words that need more explanation ideally will be taught in context and then reinforced after reading with additional scaffolding as these explanations will be more elaborate and time-consuming (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Biemiller & Boote, 2005). Words that require additional instruction after being taught in context include the following:

- Words that are abstract
- Words with multiple related meanings
- Words reflecting meanings or shades of meaning that are likely not part of the students' experiences

Visual Vocabulary cards found in *Wonders* can be used to introduce each selected vocabulary word using a Define/Example/Ask routine, based on Isabel Beck's work, which engages students to access word meanings and apply them in different contexts. Creating a visual chart or "anchor chart" of the vocabulary routine during the lesson allows students to consistently rehearse and refer back to the routine. This supports their ability to access other new words in familiar contexts.

Define/Example/Ask Vocabulary Routine

Define	Define the word
Example	Provide a relevant student-friendly example
Ask	Check student understanding by asking for application

Teaching students vocabulary and word identification skills is an essential requisite for their reading success. (Biemiller, 2010). Teaching vocabulary in a well-established routine can support students’ ability to “own the words” and apply the routine to words they encounter in future texts.

Teachers consistently will be making assessment-informed instructional decisions as to when and what to spend instructional time on during word study to support students. Constant monitoring of what all students need in whole group, small group, and individually is a daily challenge, but one that is truly worthwhile.

The Three-Tier Vocabulary Model

The three tiers of vocabulary refer to a model that categorizes words by their frequency in texts (more to less frequently occurring) and application (broader to narrower) from bottom to top.

Since time to teach all words with the same amount of emphasis is rare in the instructional day, understanding how words are classified into tiers can help teachers plan effective vocabulary instruction.

The three-tier vocabulary model was designed to help teachers select high-value words on which to focus instructional time. Particular emphasis is recommended on students acquiring academic vocabulary, which is described here as Tier 2.

Tier 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ These are domain-specific words that are specific to a content area or field of study. They are found more commonly in informational text than in literature. ▪ Students learn these words most effectively through a content area course of study that occurs over days or weeks.
Tier 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ These are general academic words that appear across many types of texts from different content areas (i.e., identify, predict, summarize, evaluate). ▪ These words are more likely encountered in written text than in speech and are key to strong academic vocabulary and reading comprehension ▪ Students learn these words through reading texts and through explicit instruction.
Tier 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ These are common words usually heard in conversation and usually familiar to students in early grade levels. ▪ Children learn these words through everyday speech while listening and talking with other children and adults.

Benefits of Differentiated Spelling Instruction

Spelling “is important for the role it plays in our becoming literate. It is important for the role it plays in developing better readers, fluent writers, and articulate speakers” (Gentry, 2004, p. 105).

Unfortunately, in many classrooms spelling instruction is isolated, disconnected from word study as a whole. On Monday, students are assigned to copy a list of 10 or more words that are written on the board. For homework, students might rewrite those words again. They might also be required to look up and copy the words’ dictionary definitions. Students might even write sentences using each word for a grade. The final step is a test on Friday on words that, many times, students may rarely see again in their reading and writing. Do students sustain working knowledge of words from this isolated routine?

Research shows that students need meaningful, multiple, and various exposures to a word before they will fully understand the word’s meaning and effectively apply it in their reading and writing. Research also shows that students should be taught words that they will encounter often in print.

The NRP (2000) reports that the more thoroughly students learn high-utility words, the better they will be able to comprehend text that contains these or similar words. Student mastery of these words is reinforced as they see these words in print. Because the words students see most often in print are characteristic of a core set of word families, the learning of one word unlocks the meaning of many other new words.

Based on this evidence, we must reevaluate the way we teach spelling.

A more promising alternative is to embed spelling instruction within word study and to differentiate spelling instruction so that it accommodates a wide range of learners, from special needs to gifted students. This approach allows students to investigate and understand the patterns in words, engage in various word sorts, and discover words in meaningful, transferable ways, rather than memorizing disconnected word lists.

Wonders includes differentiated spelling lists and word sorts available for both Approaching and Beyond levels as well as spelling words based on word study that include reviews and challenges. These lists can serve as a basis for scaffolding and supporting student learning.

Consistent monitoring and formative assessments are also an important part of this model to allow teachers to track whether or not students are able to transfer their knowledge of patterns to a new word they have not seen before. Adding flexibility, relevance, differentiation, and fun is a win-win for students and teachers!

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