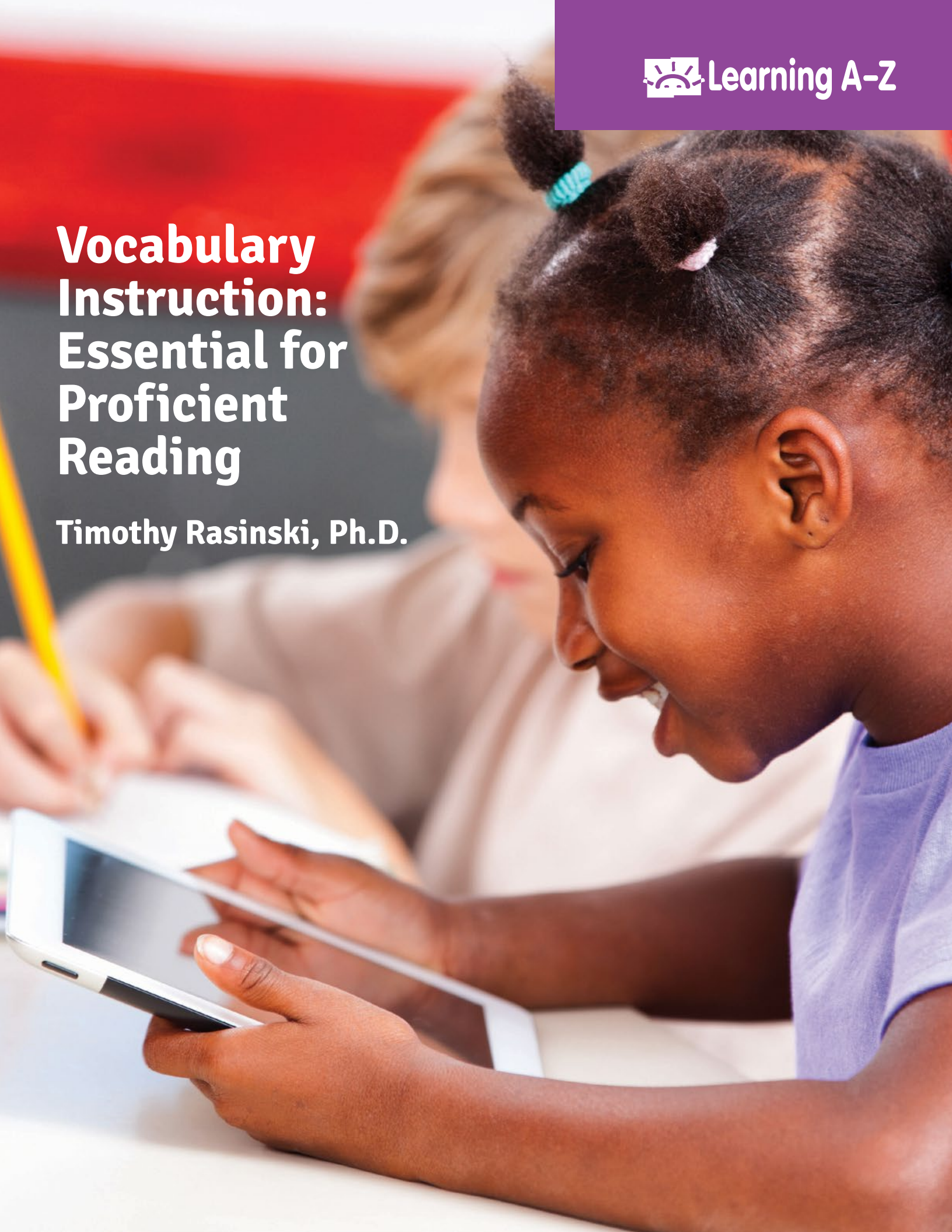


Vocabulary Instruction: Essential for Proficient Reading

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According to scholars, understanding word meaning accounts for as much as 80% of reading comprehension (Davis, 1972; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Clearly, if we want students to become proficient readers, we need to provide them with high-quality vocabulary instruction. Proficient reading requires the reader to comprehend and learn from a text. Similarly, proficient comprehension requires the reader to understand the words in a text.

The problem is that traditional vocabulary instruction has not been highly effective or engaging for students. Anyone reading this paper can probably remember a time when they were given the assignment of looking up and writing the dictionary definitions of a list of words, perhaps also being required to use each word in a sentence and then to memorize the definition and spelling of each word. If you were a good student, you may have received an A or B on the “end-of-the-week” test, but you promptly forgot the words and their definitions by the following Monday. Relying solely on these tasks, or perhaps completing worksheets that involve matching words to their definitions, without more engaging activities, is likely to diminish a student’s interest in word study.

If you are like me, you are a lexophile: someone who loves words, what they mean, what they might imply, how they originated, how they are constructed, and so on. Lexophiles know that vocabulary instruction can be much more engaging and effective than the rote memorization approach.

Vocabulary instruction should be an essential part of any literacy or content-area curriculum. In this paper, I demonstrate how intentional vocabulary instruction can be made engaging and effective for students and teachers.

Why Is Vocabulary Important?

The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension was established decades ago (e.g. Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Davis, 1942). More recently, in its review of scientific research on factors that contribute to proficient reading, the National Reading Panel (2000) identified vocabulary as one of the five critical components of effective reading curricula. A longitudinal study conducted over a 10-year span by Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found that vocabulary knowledge in grade one predicted reading achievement in middle and high school.



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Writing also requires knowing and using a large number of vocabulary words. When writers have more words at their disposal, choosing the best words and phrases to express what they wish to communicate, their writing improves. Most writing rubrics used to evaluate student writing include word choice as one of the major characteristics of good writing. Writing expert Ruth Culham (2005) identified word choice as one of the six traits of proficient writing.

Vocabulary is also important for learning beyond the language arts. Every content area features its own specialized words and concepts. If students do not understand *ellipse* or *trapezoid* in mathematics, *refraction* or *centripetal force* in science, *indigenous* or *suffrage* in social studies, or *iconography* or *palette* in art, they may have difficulty understanding texts that contain these words. Reading to learn, a critical achievement each student must master after learning to read, becomes extremely difficult without understanding the ideas and concepts in a text. What complicates content-area learning even more is that the same word can have different meanings in different subject areas. For example, the word *revolution* has a specific meaning in history and social studies (e.g., the American Revolution). However, that very same word has a different meaning in science (e.g., the revolution of planets around the sun). Students need substantial vocabularies and a complex understanding of word meanings to succeed in content-area learning.

Reading is not the only way vocabulary learning takes place; it occurs in other situations involving oral language: classroom lectures, discussion, collaboration, experimentation, webinars, multimedia presentations, etc. Students with limited vocabularies are likely to be less proficient in their learning through these media.

Another area often overlooked when it comes to vocabulary acquisition is confidence. With confidence in their abilities, students are more likely to be successful in the learning tasks set before them. Everyone feels more confident in their ability to accurately express thoughts and ideas when they have a large, meaningful vocabulary from which to draw.

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The Challenges of Teaching Vocabulary

Teaching vocabulary can be challenging. English vocabulary is enormous: some scholars (Fry, 2011) argue that English has more words (more than half a million) than any other language, and more than twice as many as German or French. English has so many words in part because it borrows words heavily from other languages (German, French, Scandinavian languages, Latin, and Greek, just to name a few) and words are constantly being added. So which words should a teacher choose? A 20-word list with limited class time for instruction and practice won't get students very far (20 words per week for 36 weeks in a school year for 12 years of school comes to only 8,640 words). Graves (2016) suggests that from grades 1 through 12, students who are linguistically advantaged add approximately 40,000 words each year to their speaking

and reading vocabularies. Achieving the desired goal may in fact require shorter lists with more frequent classroom instruction, independent practice, and a focus on specialized Tier 3 vocabulary.

Another challenge is that traditionally vocabulary instruction has not been a major dedicated part of the school curriculum. When vocabulary instruction consists of mastering lists of words or completing worksheets, word study may not be engaging or effective for either teachers or students. Moreover, simply memorizing definitions or matching definitions to words does not ensure understanding of the words. Dictionary definitions can be as confusing as the words they are supposed to clarify, and the sentences students write can demonstrate significant misunderstandings of word meanings.

Take for example the following examples of student writing compiled by Richard Lederer (1987) in his book *Anguished English*:

- Moses led them (Hebrews) to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread made without any ingredients.
- Abraham Lincoln became America's greatest Precedent.
- Samuel Morse invented a code for telepathy.
- Louis Pasteur discovered a cure for rabbis.

Although humorous, such examples are not uncommon for many teachers. In my own experience, I observed multiple 8th grade students reading a passage on the Wright brothers that included a photo of their first flyer. One word appeared multiple times in the passage: *biplane*. But instead of pronouncing the word conventionally as *bi-plane*, over half the students pronounced it *bip-lane*. How do you think students' comprehension works when they "read" words that don't exist? Ideally, in these particular students' 8–9 years of schooling, someone would have taught them that the prefix "bi" refers to things occurring in twos.

The 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) vocabulary study brought into clear view the consequences of failing to focus on vocabulary instruction. First, the report noted that student reading comprehension was highly correlated with vocabulary knowledge. Higher scores on vocabulary assessments were associated with higher overall reading comprehension scores. This was true at all grade levels. However, at all grade levels assessed (4th, 8th, and 12th), students knew significantly fewer words on average than expected for their age and grade. Moreover, student performance in vocabulary had not changed since 2009, when the NAEP started assessing vocabulary more systematically.

This leads me to question the extent to which this poor achievement in vocabulary is contributing to the low overall reading achievement in the United States. Over the past three decades, student reading achievement has not improved, despite various literacy-related initiatives at the national and state levels. If numerous expensive literacy initiatives have not improved reading achievement, and if vocabulary acquisition (a major contributor to reading proficiency) in the U.S. is inadequate, there is reason to believe that poor vocabulary performance may be one of the factors preventing students from achieving better reading performance.

Clearly, a greater dedication to effective, engaging vocabulary instruction is necessary, one that moves beyond word lists and worksheets.

What Can We Do About Vocabulary?

We know that vocabulary skills are important for achievement in reading and other academic areas. We also know that despite an ever-growing body of English words, vocabulary achievement has not shown any significant improvement over the years assessed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Finally, we know that vocabulary instruction has not been a priority in many schools and classrooms, and that when it occurs it tends to be rote memorization, which students and teachers have come to dread.

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Dimensions of Vocabulary

One common mistake regarding vocabulary instruction is the assumption that it only applies to learning new or unfamiliar words. Of course, a lot of vocabulary learning is about acquiring new words. But vocabulary learning can and should also be about learning the meanings of familiar words in greater depth. Throughout our lives, there are many words that we think we know, but our understanding of their meanings may be rather shallow. For me, *ascetic*, *brogan*, and *fulminate* fit into this category. I have a general sense of what these words may mean or imply, but in reality my understanding of these words is partial and perhaps even inaccurate. Learning about these words in greater depth would constitute legitimate vocabulary instruction for me. The point I wish to make is that learning more about words they may already know is actually a legitimate and often crucial form of vocabulary instruction for students. The assumption that vocabulary instruction only involves completely new words limits the depth of students' vocabulary knowledge.

Similarly, many words in English are *homographs*: words that are spelled identically but have different meanings depending on the context (e.g., tear, fair, lie). Helping students learn new meanings for words they already know is legitimate vocabulary instruction, too.

Another vocabulary challenge involves words and phrases whose meanings go beyond the literal: figurative language, such as idiomatic expressions (e.g., "It's raining cats and dogs" or "She has her head in the clouds"). Because these expressions are meant to be understood metaphorically rather than literally, they are a challenge for many students, especially those for whom English is not the first language. Exploring the meanings and uses of words and phrases of this nature is yet another often neglected form of important vocabulary instruction.

Much more than matching words with a particular definition, effective vocabulary instruction is a complex and challenging task. However, the payoff is well worth the effort: higher reading proficiency, better writing, and stronger learning across a wide range of subjects.

Principles of Effective, Engaging, and Intentional Vocabulary Instruction

Up to this point, I have made the case that vocabulary instruction is both challenging and essential. Next, I'd like to outline some general principles (Rasinski, Padak, & Fawcett, 2010) to help guide teachers and educators in developing or choosing a vocabulary curriculum.

Rather than teaching words primarily in isolation, vocabulary instruction should be woven into what students are already reading and studying.

1. Vocabulary instruction should be integrative.

Comprehension is often defined as connecting new information to existing knowledge. The same is true for vocabulary. Therefore, new words and concepts are best learned (and taught) in relation to students' existing and developing knowledge. Teaching words that are related to one another allows students to make connections between words. Also, rather than teaching words primarily in isolation, vocabulary instruction should be woven into what students are already reading and studying:

- making teachable moments out of interesting words encountered in authentic reading experiences,
- integrating vocabulary instruction into the various topics under study in the content areas, or
- connecting vocabulary learning to a current event.

2. Vocabulary instruction should involve active processing and discussion.

A good vocabulary program offers plenty of ways to talk about words and engage in meaningful activity with words. Asking students to come up with synonyms or antonyms and then discuss how the words are similar and different gets students thinking deeply about words. Similarly, engaging students in categorizing a set of words or doing a cloze activity provides them with opportunities to be actively and meaningfully engaged in word study and exploration.

Repeated exposure allows students to develop a multi-faceted understanding of words, their meanings, and their usage.

3. Vocabulary instruction requires repetition and visibility.

For students to truly learn word meanings and use words correctly, they need repeated exposure to the words in a variety of different contexts and modalities. Moreover, those exposures should occur over a period of days and weeks rather than massed into one or two days. Students should see words in various textual contexts: word walls, cloze sentences, word sorts, word mapping, word games, etc. Ask parents and other school staff to use the words under study in their own interactions with students. This repeated exposure allows students to develop a multi-faceted understanding of the words, their meanings, and their usage.

4. Vocabulary instruction should focus on meaningful word parts.

We often talk about the relationship between sounds and letters. We call this phonics. However, relationships also exist between meaning and letters or letter combinations. This is called morphology. Effective vocabulary instruction takes advantage of morphology by helping students understand how words are made up of meaningful components: base words, prefixes, suffixes, and inflected endings (Rasinski, Padak, Newton, & Newton, 2008). Knowledge of morphology helps students understand that when *bi-* is used as prefix the word may include the notion of two-ness, and that the prefix *tri-* means the word may have something to do with threes (e.g., tricycle, triangle).

Many base words in English are derived from Latin and Greek roots. Helping students detect the root in words and associate it with the original meaning can give students a productive approach for coming to the meaning of the word. For example, knowing that *spect* is a Latin root that means to see or observe, students can infer that the following words also address seeing or observing: *spectacle*, *spectacular*, *spectator*, *inspect*, *inspection*, *retrospection*, *circumspection*, etc.

5. Vocabulary instruction should be game-like.

Have you ever noticed how many word games adults play? Scrabble, Balderdash, Buzz Word, Password, CodeNames: all these games involve playing with words. Creating similar opportunities for play in the classroom heightens students' attention to and appreciation of word study. Rather than playing word games only after all the work is done, these engaging games should be a regular event in any vocabulary-rich classroom.

Teachers Need to Have an Open and Inquisitive Attitude About Vocabulary

If teachers are excited about words and share their excitement with students, many students will develop a similar excitement. Word study can be fascinating. Many words have interesting stories behind them. Earlier in this essay I described myself as a *lexophile*: a lover (phil[e]) of words (lex). By learning that *phil[e]* means love, students can understand why Philadelphia means “City of Brotherly Love.” Sharing such stories with students can help light the fire of interest in words.

Teachers can also be creative with words, and encourage their students to be creative too. They can even invent new words to share with students. Knowing that *phil[e]* means love, a teacher might ask students the meaning of these newly created words: *scribophile* (lover of writing) or *hydrophile* (lover of water). Of course, if teachers can create words, students can as well. Students love opportunities to make up new words using meaningful word parts and challenge classmates to determine their meanings.

Most of all, teachers should have some degree of ownership and control over how vocabulary is taught. Teachers need to have control over the words taught to students and the methods used to teach those words. Simply following an existing scripted vocabulary program denies teachers and students the opportunity to make words their own.

If we truly want to help all students become proficient readers and writers, learning important content in science, math, social studies, and other content areas, we cannot overlook vocabulary.

Make Vocabulary a Priority in Your Classroom

If we truly want to help all students become proficient readers and writers, learning important content in science, math, social studies, and other content areas, we cannot overlook vocabulary. The challenge is to create vocabulary instruction that goes beyond the traditional, engaging and challenging students to learn about words. As vocabulary scholar Karen Bromley (2007) observed, “This requires teachers who are passionate about words and language, who immerse their students in language, and who provide direct instruction that is thoughtful, intentional, and varied.”

We know the importance of vocabulary for reading, writing, and content-area learning; and we know effective ways to make vocabulary instruction meaningful for students. Now is the time for teachers at all grade levels to dedicate themselves to making vocabulary an instructional priority.

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