Rationale for Academic Vocabulary Instruction in the Upper Grades*

In the early stages of reading, a majority of words in grade-level texts are familiar to most students as part of their oral vocabularies. However, as students progress through the grades, print vocabulary increasingly includes words that are rarely part of oral vocabularies. This is particularly true for the content areas of the curriculum. Often it is the content (academic) vocabulary that carries a large share of the meaning. Therefore, it follows that understanding content vocabulary is crucial to comprehending the text. Research has clearly shown that explicit (academic) vocabulary instruction integrated across the curriculum enhances students' ability to acquire textbook vocabulary. (Baumann et al. (2003); Bos and Anders (1990).

In Building Academic Vocabulary, Marzano and Pickering highlight the connection between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of content:

*People’s knowledge of any topic is encapsulated in the terms they know that are relevant to the topic. The more students understand these terms, the easier it is for them to understand information they may read or hear about the topic. The more terms a person knows about a given subject, the easier it is to understand and learn new information related to that subject. (2005, 2-3)*

Background knowledge clearly manifests itself as vocabulary knowledge. The relationship between background knowledge and academic achievement is also well established. As early as 1941, researchers estimated that, for students in grades 4-12, a 6,000-word gap separated students at the 25th and 50th percentiles on standardized tests (Nagy & Herman, 1984). They also estimated a difference of 4,500 to 5,400 words between low- and high-achieving students. In addition, Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) found that instruction in general vocabulary (drawn from word-frequency lists) was associated with a gain of 12 percentile points in comprehension, but instruction in words specific to content was associated with a 33-point gain in percentile points. (However, it should be noted that, for adolescent students who have limited vocabularies, selecting unknown, high-frequency words remains an important instructional strategy.)

In a recent report by the IES, Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices (2008), the panel made the following recommendation:

“For adolescent readers of content materials, vocabulary should be selected on the basis of how important the words are for learning in the particular discipline, rather than the tier in which the word is located. Despite the rarity of these content-specific words, they are critical to understanding the content and should be the focus of explicit instruction.”
A strong rationale supports the use of direct vocabulary instruction as a means to enhance academic background knowledge. (This rationale also encompasses the erroneous assumptions about the adequacy of wide reading to enhance word-learning.) In Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement (Marzano, 2004), Robert Marzano makes the following recommendations for effective adolescent vocabulary instruction:

1. Introduce terms with student-friendly descriptions as opposed to definitions.
2. Include linguistic and nonlinguistic representations.
3. Ensure the gradual shaping of word meanings through multiple exposures.
4. Include instruction in word parts.
5. Students should interact about the words they are learning. They should discuss the terms with one another on a regular basis.
6. Involve students in games and activities that allow them to play with the terms.
7. Focus on terms important to academic subjects.

The amount of time and the number of terms involved in explicit vocabulary instruction will be dictated by the vocabulary load of the text as well as the students' prior knowledge of the terms. It is important to note that what students already know about a given subject is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to it. When choosing terms for instruction, it is also important to consider that relative importance of the terms themselves. Some terms may be interesting but not important to comprehending the material at hand. Some terms may be important but not critical to comprehension. Some terms, however, are critical to understanding the content and should be included in instruction.

The decision about which words to teach must also take into consideration how many words to teach in conjunction with any one text or lesson. Given that students are learning vocabulary in all content areas of the curriculum (in addition to reading/language arts), there must be some reasonable basis for limiting the number of words so that students will have the opportunity to learn critical terms well.

*The sample academic vocabulary lessons included on the website are intended for grades 5-8 and include the content areas of English/Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies. The lesson template is adapted from recommendations in Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement by Robert J. Marzano.*

