Vocabulary- Selecting Words to Teach

Introduction

In the middle years there is no formula for choosing which words to teach. What is important is that words chosen add to comprehension of the text or topic.

Beck and McKeown (2002) suggest that when evaluating words as possible candidates for instruction teachers should consider:

- How generally useful is the word?
- How does the word relate to other words, to the ideas that students know or have been learning?
- What does the word bring to a text or situation?

Beck & McKeown (1985) suggest that to help identify words for instruction vocabulary can be considered in three tiers (see table 1). The first tier consists of the most basic words. Words in this tier rarely require instruction for most students. The second tier contains words that are of high frequency for mature language users and are found across a variety of content areas. The third tier is made up of words whose frequency is quite low and often limited to specific content areas.

Type	Definition	Examples	Instruction
Common words (Tier 1)	Basic words used often in everyday conversation	dog go happy drink phone play afraid	These words do not need to be explicitly taught, especially in upper grades with native English speakers.
Sophisticated language - use words (Tier 2)	More complex, frequently occurring words in academic settings.	compare neutral contrast admire plead represent environment collaborate	Teach these words. Students will see and use these words often as sophisticated language users.
Content-specific words (Tier 3)	Highly specialised words that are related to a specific discipline.	pogrom quagmire locution polyglot sonata isosceles	Teach these words when a specific lesson requires knowledge of the word and underlying concept.

Table 1 Three tiers of vocabulary

A system has been proposed for middle years teachers by Flanigan and Greenwood (2007) which builds on the three-tier model. They suggest that middle school content teachers need something more specific for content vocabulary. They have developed a system to help teachers organise, categorise and prioritise the many types of content words they must teach, generally identified as tier three words in Beck, McKeown and Kucan's model (2002).

This system takes into account the goals of the lesson, the amount of teaching time and depth of knowledge a word would require, and when in the lesson it would be most profitable to explore a word. It involves a 'four-level framework' as a content area teacher's extension to the three tier system.

In this framework words are categorised as:

- Critical 'before' words (Level 1)
- 'Foot-in-the-door' words (Level 2)
- Critical 'after' words (Level 3)
- Words not to teach

Flanigan and Greenwood also identify a set of steps for teachers to follow when choosing vocabulary for instruction within their framework.

Purpose

The teacher will identify and prioritise words for instruction from topic and/or text.

Procedure

These steps are summarised in the Planning for Vocabulary Instruction Checklist (see Appendix1).

1. **Preview text/topic to identify (Tier 2) and content specific words (Tier 3)**

When previewing text choose words that:
- students *must know* in order to understand what they read.
- students *are likely to use and encounter frequently*.
- words that are not adequately defined in context.
- words that are not in students' background knowledge.
- words students may not know based on structure.

These words can then be categorised into Tier 2 and Tier 3 words (see table 1).

2. **Prioritise Tier 2 words that will be the target for vocabulary instruction**

These words could include those that students will:
- encounter in a range of contexts,
- have many opportunities to use, and
- use as part of the sophisticated vocabulary of oral and written language.

3. Prioritise Tier 3 words that will be the target for vocabulary instruction

Use the steps proposed by Flanigan and Greenwood (2007) to select and prioritise tier 3 content-specific words (see Appendix 2). The types of tier 3 content-specific words are described below.

Level 1 (critical 'before' words)	• They are absolutely essential to understanding the passage • They represent concepts of which students need an in-depth understanding before reading to successfully understand the text	in depth knowledge	moderate to significant teaching time

Level 2 ('foot-in-the-door' words)	• New label/new concept words
	  o represent an unfamiliar concept
	  o require just a clear definition and an example sentence
	• New words/familiar concepts
	  o require a synonym or clear definition
		surface-level knowledge	minimal teaching time

Level 3 (critical 'after' words)	• Content words that don't need to be fully understood **before** reading to understand the text • Content words that are defined clearly and explicitly in the text • High utility words that a students will likely encounter in other texts • Words that can be used to teach 'preciseness of language' (e.g. lope for run).	variable level of knowledge depending on purpose	variable level of teaching time depending on purpose
Level 4 (words not to teach)	• Words that students probably already know. • Words that do not serve teacher's instructional goal. • Words the student can infer from the surrounding content.	previously known words	words that don't serve lesson objectives

Flanigan & Greenwood (2007)

References

Beck, I. L. & McKeown, M. G (1985). Teaching vocabulary: Making the instruction fit the goal. *Educational Perspectives*, 23(1). 11-15.

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2002). Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction. New York: Guilford.

Flanigan, K. & Greenwood, S.C. (2007). Effective content vocabulary instruction in the middle: Matching students, purposes, words and strategies. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 51:3, 226-238.

Appendix 1 - The Planning for Vocabulary Instruction Checklist

Planning for Vocabulary Instruction Checklist
PREVIEW the text/topic with the instructional goals in mind.
IDENTIFY: (You may not be able to directly teach all of these words.) Tier 2 (sophisticated language-use) words and Tier 3 (content-specific words).
PRIORITISE TIER 2 WORDS: • Big-idea and multiple-meaning words. • Words students must understand in order to comprehend the text/topic. • Words that may be unfamiliar to students. Eliminate: Words that are adequately defined in context - discuss these words while reading instead of pre-teaching the words. Words likely to be in students' background knowledge - discuss these words during the activation of prior knowledge part of the lesson. Words students may know based on structure: prefix, suffix, or base word - discuss the meaning of these word parts before or during reading, as necessary.
PRIORITISE TIER 3 WORDS: Level 1 - critical 'before' words Level 2 – 'foot-in-the-door' words Level 3 – critical 'after' words Level 4 – words not to teach

Appendix 2 – Process for prioritising Tier 3 words

Process for choosing words and strategies
Step 1 Read the text and determine the instructional goals of the lesson.
Step 2 Based on the lesson goals, identify words/concepts that students should know (at some level) by the end of the lesson. These are the Level 1, 2 and 3 words. Words that aren't chosen are Level 4 words.
Step 3 "Chunk" instruction by teaching related concepts together (e.g. it makes sense to teach *omnivore*, *carnivore* and *herbivore* together). Chunking concepts helps the students make connections across concepts while saving teachers valuable instructional time.
Step 4 Which words/concepts does the student absolutely need to know *before* reading? These are the Level 1 (in-depth knowledge) and Level ("foot-in-the-door" knowledge) words.
Step 5 Which words does the student need to know, but not necessarily before reading text? These are the Level 3 words and can be addressed *after* reading.
Step 6 What, specifically, do you want the student to know about each word? What is the learning task for the student? In addition, think of how related terms are conceptually connected. These factors will help determine *how* you teach the word (i.e. which teaching strategy you choose).

Flanigan & Greenwood (2007)