Sadlier School
**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES**

# Vocabulary: The Foundation of Literacy, Volume II

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

This series of Professional Development eBooks, outlines what teachers need to understand about the definition and role of academic vocabulary in content-learning. It also explores a range of principles and strategies that teachers can use to design and implement effective vocabulary instruction.

In review, *Volume I* introduced the definition, importance, and development of academic vocabulary and of vocabulary learning through direct instruction. This volume continues to focus on direct instruction and on strategies that support the development of word knowledge and independent word learning.

College-bound students need to have 75,000–120,000 words in their vocabularies[1]. They can acquire 300–500 new words annually through direct instruction. Since vocabulary knowledge is essential to students' reading proficiency, it is imperative that students develop the skills to learn new vocabulary independently. Direct instruction of word-learning strategies helps students increase their vocabulary knowledge significantly.

Direct vocabulary instruction is most effective when it acknowledges the complexity of word learning. Minimally, effective teachers of vocabulary:

- Offer students language-and literacy-rich classroom environments.

- Demonstrate enthusiasm for and exhibit a committed personal interest in word learning.

- Are explicitly purposeful and systematic in their selection of focal words and the skills and strategies they use to teach them.

- Treat vocabulary learning as an active, generative, integrative, and cognitive process.[2]

- Provide students with multiple exposures to focal words in multiple contexts over an extended period of time— as well as multiple opportunities for students to use new vocabulary expressively and receptively in oral as well as written language and in novel contexts.

- Model and engage students with a variety of word-learning strategies and explicitly teach them how to use those strategies independently.

# PURPOSES FOR DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

The words, skills, and strategies that English teachers choose to teach depend on their *purposes* for vocabulary instruction. These purposes can include the development of students' word consciousness as well as the development of their understanding about the relationship between word structure and word meaning, the relationship between word usage and word meaning, the role of vocabulary in content learning, and standardized test preparation.

## Teaching Word Consciousness

One purpose for direct vocabulary instruction, especially in the English classroom where language itself is a focus of study, is the cultivation of students' word consciousness—that is their enthusiasm for, interest in, and ability to understand words as meaning-bearing (semantic) entities[3]. Teachers who develop students' word consciousness effectively demonstrate their own curiosity and fascination for academic language[4] by modeling and explaining strategies they themselves use as on-going, independent students of vocabulary. For example, teachers can share how they use a word notebook to gather and reflect about interesting language they hear or see[5]; or they can describe the processes they use to integrate new words into their current vocabularies and the reasons why those processes work for them.

Effective instruction about word consciousness also develops students' self-awareness (or metacognition) about how to learn new vocabulary independently[6]. Research has found that direct instruction of metacognitive word-learning skills affects vocabulary growth as well as reading comprehension[7]. In fact, one of the main differences between successful and struggling readers is their ability to recognize when and why their comprehension begins to fail, choose purposefully among an array of appropriate strategies to correct their course, and assess the success of their chosen strategy in meeting their reading challenges.

## Teaching about the Relationship between Word Structure and Word Meaning

A second purpose for direct vocabulary instruction is to help students understand the relationship between the structure of a word and its meaning. Research has shown that the meaning of 60% of polysyllabic words "can be inferred by analyzing word parts"[8] and that direct instruction has a significant impact on students' ability to do so[9]. Effective instruction about word structure far exceeds memorization. It explicitly, systematically, and actively engages students in investigating how and why word structure and meaning are related. Through mini-lessons and a wide variety of opportunities to apply new knowledge about the relation between word structure and meaning, students can learn to apply principles and strategies of this kind of word learning independently.

Instruction regarding the relationship between word structure and meaning typically focuses on roots (bases, prefixes, and suffixes). Learning about word roots is important given that roughly three-quarters of English-language words have foreign origin[10] . Further, academic language uses more words with foreign roots than does everyday language. For example, a third of all English words have Greek or Latin roots, and the fields of science and technology use the largest proportion of those words. Strategic instruction about roots (and Greek and Latin roots in particular) can help students unlock the meanings of such unknown, academic vocabulary[11]. Direct instruction of word roots should, minimally, include the following activities.

1. **Explain the function of roots.**

   - **Give examples of words that stem from Greek or Latin roots.**

   - **Model and explain how to analyze roots (e.g., how to break words into bases, prefixes, and suffixes, how to determine meanings of word parts, and how to use those meanings to determine the meaning of an entire word).**

   - **Provide routine practice using a focal root and its definition. Have students use words with the root in their talk.**

   - **Guide students' discovery of words with the root in assigned reading and use those words to practice their word learning skills.**

   - **Discuss why and how the meaning of a root contributes to the meaning of a word in combination with the meaning of the word's other roots.**

   - **Ask students to apply their knowledge of roots in their writing.**

2. **Provide students with a list of common prefixes, suffixes, and Greek and Latin roots for reference and/or have students develop their own lists. Explain how to use the list as a resource.**

3. **Intersperse instruction with opportunities for students to experiment (or "play") with Greek and Latin roots (e.g., through word games).**

## Teaching the Relationship between Word Usage and Word Meaning

A third purpose for direct vocabulary instruction is to develop students' understanding about the intrinsic relationship between word usage and word meaning. Words whose meaning can change from one context to another are called "polysemous." Polysemous words can serve as different parts of speech (e.g., "plot" can be a noun or verb), and/or they can have specialized meanings in different content-areas ("plot" is a noun or verb relating to thematic development in literature while it is a noun or verb pertaining to a graph of data points in mathematics). Often, polysemous words are Tier 2 vocabulary—those academic words either used consistently across disciplines (e.g., compare/contrast, cite, enumerate) or differently by discipline (the "analysis" of poetic style requires a different process than the "analysis" of the validity of an historical argument).



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To help students become self-aware of the relationship between word usage and meaning, instruction often focuses on denotation and connotation, historical influences, semantic relationships in word families, the impact of context on word meaning, and the role of words in figurative language.

## STRATEGIES FOR DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

The denotation of a word is its literal ("neutral") meaning, as found in a dictionary. Research is clear that dictionary use alone is insufficient for effective word-learning[12]. As a reference, however, the dictionary can offer students a wealth of supplemental information about multiple aspects of a word's structure and meaning[13] (e.g., syllabication, pronunciation, languages of origin, cognates, and parts of speech as well as synonyms, antonyms, and illustrative usage). Students need to be fully aware about the resources that dictionaries can offer as well as when and how to use them. Because dictionary definitions often lack examples of words' applications, research suggests that teachers might provide students with easily understood definitions of words as well as a few examples of how those words function in different contexts[14] before referring students to a dictionary. Students can then practice using the definitions of new words in their writing, their talk, or in sentence-completion exercises which ask them to choose the appropriate meaning of a word from a list of possible meanings or a choice of two synonyms.

# STRATEGIES FOR DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

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In addition to their denotative meanings, words also carry connotation—an implied tone or point of view that signals whether the word is emotionally positive (slender, amiable) or negative (scrawny, emaciated). For example, an author might present a character with a private personality either favorably (e.g., as thoughtful or discreet) or negatively (as wary or furtive).

Students can practice inferring connotation by:

- Examining how connotations of synonyms vary (e.g., meet [neutral]; embrace [positive]; confront [negative]).

- Identifying the connotation of vocabulary in word lists (e.g., famished [negative/-], serene [positive/+], and terrain [neutral/0]).

- Choosing connotations of words that best fit the contexts of the sentences in which they appear. (E.g., The [inept, untrained] gardener had trouble keeping even the hardiest plants alive) and then explaining their connotative choices (e.g., "inept" has a more negative connotation than "untrained" because not everyone who is "untrained" is "inept," and because keeping a hardy plant alive should be a relatively simple process).



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## Teaching Historical Influences on Word Meaning

Through the study of the history of the English language, students can develop an appreciation for and even a fascination about how the denotation and connotation of words can change over time. Using the *Oxford English Dictionary* or an online dictionary, students can discover that "town" initially meant "fence" or the space within a fence; however, now it is a more generalized description of any city or village (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town#Origin_and_use). Some words' definitions have narrowed over time. For example, "starve" originally meant "to die" but now means to die, specifically from lack of nourishment; and "girl" originally referred to a female or male child. Other words have acquired more positive (ameliorative) connotations (e.g., "bad" is now used to describe something in a negative or positive light) while others have developed negative (pejorative) connotations (e.g., "silly" in Old English meant "happy, fortuitous, prosperous." Its current definition ["lacking in good sense, stupid or foolish, ridiculous, and stunned"] is more negative) (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/silly?s=t).

## Teaching about Word Families

Words belong to "families"—groups of words with shared roots and affixes or those that are semantically related to the same concept or category (e.g., "powder," "slush," "blizzard," and "flurry" refer to various kinds of snow conditions). When possible, direct instruction should provide students with opportunities to recognize connections among the meanings of known and new vocabular[15] . For example, students can identify conceptual connections among words using a semantic map, a visual tool that can prepare and guide students' understanding of the relationship among new words[16]. Semantic mapping involves the following steps.

1. "Choose a word [concept] or topic related to classroom work. List the word on a large chart, tablet or on the blackboard."

2. Ask students to list as many words as they can that are related to the […] key word and then […] [organize their lists into categories] on a sheet of paper.

3. [Have] [s]tudents … share [their] […] [words and categories] orally and [add them, by category, to the class map].[17]

### Word Web
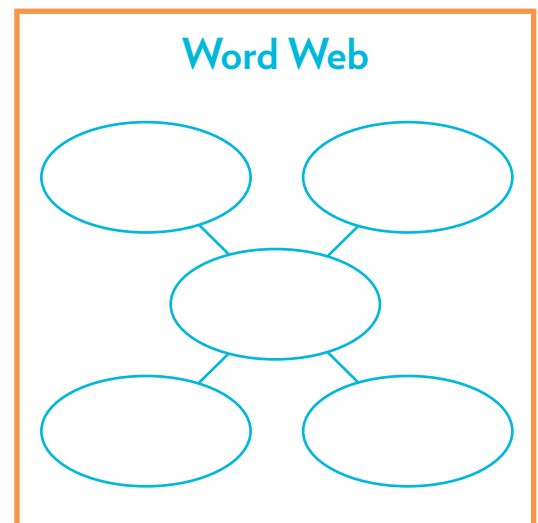
Semantic feature analysis is another way students can activate prior knowledge about a key concept and then use that knowledge to understand new information while, at the same time, recognizing how words and concepts within a particular category are related to each other[18]. To prepare a semantic feature analysis, teachers choose a concept (e.g., how poets' uses of imagery reflect their poetic styles). In the left-hand column of a grid, teachers might list the titles of several poems by one poet. Across the top of the grid, teachers might provide a list of features related to imagery (e.g., personification, alliteration, cacophony, metaphor, metrics, and/or theme). Then, as instruction proceeds, students can note the presence (+) or lack of presence (-) of particular features of imagery in each poet's work. To consolidate their learning, students can use their semantic feature analysis to discuss how a poet's stylistic use of imagery is consistent or not across the poet's work; or students might analyze how the poet's use of imagery affects the meaning each poem conveys.

## Conclusion

Direct instruction not only supports students' learning of academic vocabulary but is critical to that learning. Students' understanding of and self-awareness about how to use effective word-learning strategies can support the development of their word knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge independently in college and in their careers.

For vocabulary instruction to succeed, teachers should identify (and be explicit with students about) their purposes for word learning. Based on those purposes, teachers can then choose appropriate target words, skills, and strategies for instruction. Purposes can include the development of students' word consciousness as well as the development of their understanding about the relationship between word structure and word meaning and the relationship between word usage and word meaning.

In the following eBook (Volume III) the topic of vocabulary instruction continues with a focus on the role of vocabulary in content learning and in standardized test preparation.

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1. Blachowicz et al., (2006); Bravo & Cervetti, (2008); Bromley, (2007); Curtis & Longo, (2001); Graves, (2008); Nagy, (1988)

2. cf., Graves, (2008), 61

3. Bromley, (2007)

4. e.g., to collect new or interesting words or phrases, their definitions, and examples of their use Bromley, (2007), 535

5. Graves, (2008); Harmon, Wood, & Hedrick, (2008); Nagy, (1988)

6. cf., Blachowicz et al., (2006), 528

7. Bromley, (2007), 533

8. Blachowicz et al., (2006), 530

9. Bromley, (2007), 528

10. Heller, (2016)

11. Rasinski, (2008)

12. Graves, (2007)

13. Padak, Newton, Rasinski, & Newton, (2008)

14. Padak, Newton, Rasinski, and Newton, (2008), 14-15

15. Blachowicz et al., (2006), 530

16. Graves, (2008); 68

17. Graves, (2008); Beck & McKeown, (2007)

18. Bravo & Cervetti, (2008), 142; cf., Curtis, (2009)

19. adapted from Shostak, (2009), 4

20. Heimlich and Pittelman, (1986), 5

21. Pittelman, Heimlich, Berglund, & French, (1991), 5

22. Other online sources (all downloaded on February 16, 2015

23. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/touch?s=t

24. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/silly?s=t

25. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/contact

26. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town#Origin_and_use

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