

Sadlier School

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Vocabulary:
The Foundation of Literacy,
Volume III

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Purposes for Direct Instruction of Academic Vocabulary	2
The Role of Vocabulary in Content Learning	3
Standardized Test Preparation	5
Conclusion	6
References	7
About the Author	8
Related programs	Back Cover

As noted in our two previous Professional Development eBooks by Dr. Vicki Jacobs, direct instruction of academic vocabulary is critical to the academic success of all students—especially struggling readers, English language learners, and those from socio-economically disadvantaged home environments. Deep learning of new vocabulary exceeds memorization; it requires inquiry into the “why” of words’ meanings and into “how” new vocabulary (and the concepts they represent) relates to prior knowledge and to other words. Additionally, explicit instruction in how to learn about words is critical if students are to use word-learning strategies to develop their vocabulary on an on-going and independent basis.

The *Volume III* eBook continues to focus on the purposes and strategies for direct instruction of academic vocabulary, with particular attention to the impact of context on word meaning, the nature of figurative language, and the role of vocabulary in content learning and standardized test preparation.



PURPOSES AND STRATEGIES FOR DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Teaching about the Impact of Context on Word Meaning

Using a contextual approach to vocabulary learning, students try to infer the meaning of a word by using semantic and syntactic clues from surrounding text (such as immediate or adjoining sentences or phrases and visuals such as charts, graphs, and pictures). To determine the meaning of unknown words, skilled readers search for such context clues as synonyms (e.g., “The stubborn, *headstrong* horse refused to take the path the rider wanted him to take.”), comparative information (e.g., “It seems to me that my plan is *plausible* when I compare it to your far-fetched ideas.”), and clarifying descriptions (e.g., “Like any *pessimist*, my brother always expects the worse and waits for it to happen.”).

Teaching about Figurative Language

Across states, English Language Arts Standards require students to be able to determine the meaning of figurative language in both literary and informational text¹. Figurative language includes idioms (informal expressions whose literal meaning cannot be inferred from context—such as “the apple of my eye”), adages (which describe a culturally-bound, common experience—such as “time flies when you are having fun”), and proverbs (a statement about a lesson or moral—such as “a rolling stone gathers no moss”). Figurative language can also include similes and metaphors, personification, euphemisms, hyperbole, and slogans. Because the meaning of figurative language is usually implied (rather than explicit) and because figures of speech are often culture- and language-specific, learning and using figurative language can be especially challenging for English language learners.

WORD STUDY

Idioms In the passage “The Globe Theater ‘Then and Now’” (see pages 12–15), the author says that reality TV stars “have nothing on” the old Globe’s performers.

“Have nothing on” is an idiom that means “have no advantage over someone.” An **idiom** is a figure of speech or an informal expression that is not meant literally. You learn idioms by hearing them used in daily conversations. Idioms can be fun to use in conversations, but because they are informal, use them carefully in writing.

Choosing the Right Idiom

Read each sentence. Use context clues to figure out the meaning of each idiom in **boldface**. Draw a line with the letter of the definition for the idiom in the sentence.

1. Vicki, who always **keeps an ear to the ground**, knew about the corporate takeover long before it was announced. _____
2. Joe offered to **lend a hand** to the neighbors, who were moving some heavy furniture into storage. _____
3. If you want people here to trust you, you have to **play the rules and keep your nose clean**. _____
4. If you would only **get off my back**, I could concentrate and get this finished more quickly. _____
5. If we **put our heads together**, maybe we can figure out this math problem. _____
6. The teacher maintained his formal, detached manner, refusing to **let his hair down**. _____
7. The pitcher was so convincing and seemed so honest that he really **pulled the wool over our eyes**. _____
8. I wanted to tell him that I thought he should dress up more for the party, but I **held my tongue**. _____
9. Don't **lean your back on them** now, when they need your help the most. _____
10. The best espresso machines have Italy use an **arm and a leg**, so our cafe will have to buy one without one. _____

a. work together to think through a problem
b. stay out of trouble
c. ignore; refuse to offer help
d. a large amount of money
e. relax; have fun
f. give close attention to learn about what will happen
g. keep silent
h. stop pretending or annoying me
i. help someone complete a job
j. deceived us

24 • Word Study

Vocabulary Workshop Achieve, Level E

THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY IN CONTENT LEARNING

Several strategies can support students' learning of and practice with figurative language. For example, students can visualize figurative language then describe what they visualize verbally or artistically. Students can use context clues to predict the meaning of an idiom, adage, or proverb and then, based on their predictions, choose an appropriate definition from a list of possibilities and provide a rationalization for their choice. Students can also practice identifying figurative language in extended text, predicting implied meanings, explaining reasons for their predictions, and then comparing their predictions with other possible interpretations.

THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY IN CONTENT LEARNING

English Language Arts Standards and the research which frames standards note the importance of locating vocabulary learning within and across the disciplines². As students advance through the grades, the vocabulary of content-specific genres become increasingly technical, specialized, conceptual, and critical to comprehension³. For example, by the middle grades, comprehending a short story involves much more than recognizing a sequence of events; it involves an investigation of that sequence using literary concepts such as plot development, characterization, imagery, and theme. In addition, students need to learn how and why the language of certain literature reflects a literary period or an author's style (e.g., how and why the style of the Romantic or Regency literary periods may have influenced Jane Austen's use of language or how and why Gabriel García Márquez's use of language is related to the genre of magical realism). Direct vocabulary instruction can support the development of students' comprehension of content-specific texts⁴.

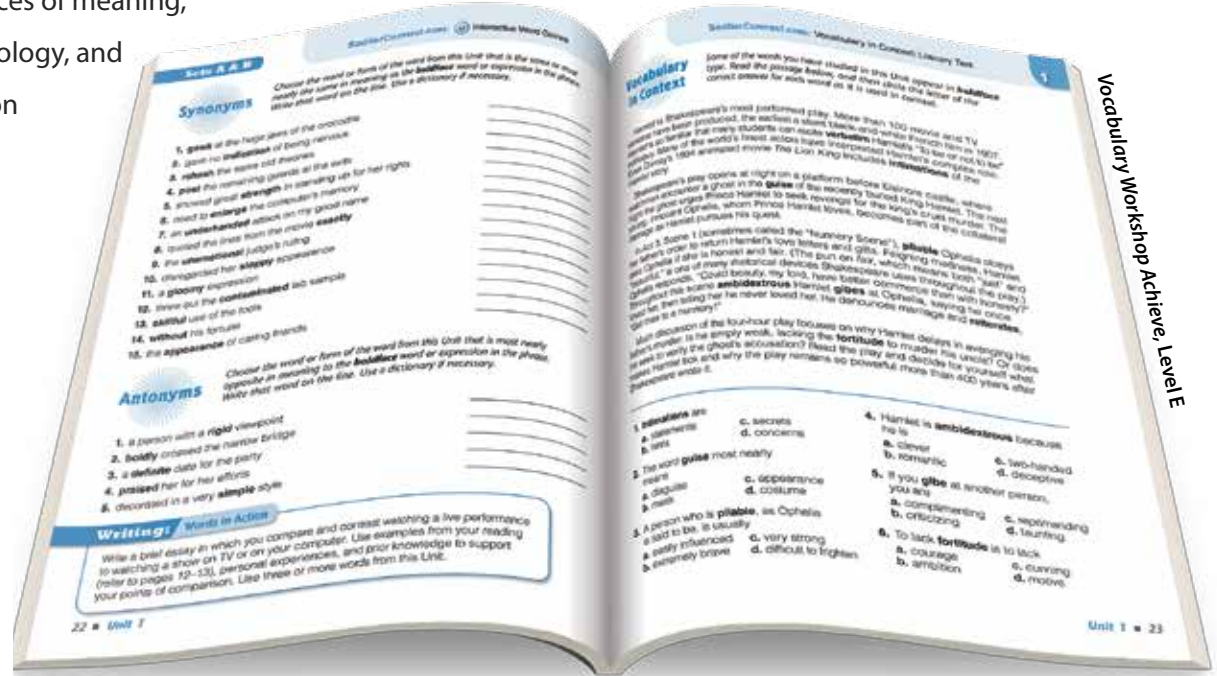
One purpose of teaching vocabulary that supports reading comprehension is to develop word-learning skills. The first step in vocabulary skill instruction is selecting focal vocabulary—those words that are critical to understand in order to achieve instructional goals and comprehension. Teachers can introduce strategies for word learning in context of teaching such reading skills as locating main ideas, close reading, assessing the strength of evidence, examining the relation between text structure and meaning, and drawing inferences.



THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY IN CONTENT LEARNING

English Language Arts teachers should provide students with a variety of activities and strategies to practice word-learning skills and apply those skills to a variety of classic and contemporary fiction and nonfiction. For example, teachers can:

1. Identify and discuss focal vocabulary as they appear in a text and ask students to hypothesize and argue for a definition of a word by using context.
2. Ask students to use graphic organizers to organize their developing understanding of conceptual vocabulary (such as plot, setting, characterization, and imagery—terms that are pivotal to the comprehension of fiction). Students can use their graphic organizers to review for a test or prepare a culminating essay.
3. Model and encourage students' meaningful use of the new vocabulary words in classroom oral and written discourse about assigned reading.
4. Provide means by which students can explore how the meaning of new vocabulary is related to its structure and usage—noting new words'
 - semantic families,
 - nuances of meaning,
 - etymology, and
 - diction



A second way to teach new vocabulary is to capitalize on the fact that the process of acquiring conceptual word knowledge is a cognitive, meaning-making process that is quite similar to the process of reading comprehension. Both processes include three stages: preparation for learning, guided learning, and consolidation of learning⁵.

STANDARDIZED TEST PREPARATION

Stage I: Preparation for Learning New Concepts

During this stage, teachers:

- provide students with means by which they can activate, extend, amend, and organize the background knowledge and experience (or schemata—structures through which related information is organized in long-term memory) that are relevant to learning new concepts (and the vocabulary that represents those concepts)
- explain to students how background knowledge and experience is relevant to understanding new concepts.

Stage II: Guided Learning

During this stage, teachers provide instructional means by which students can:

- investigate, enrich, deepen, and revise their understanding of new concepts;
- integrate background knowledge and experience with new concepts ; and
- practice appropriate strategies for word-learning and comprehension.

Stage III: Consolidation of Learning

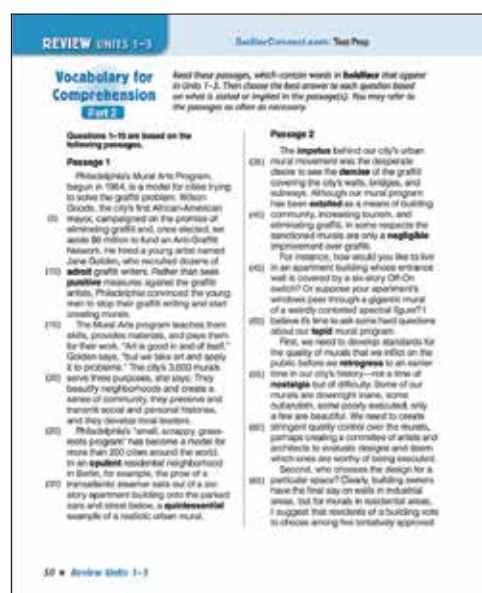
During this final stage, teachers provide students with the means to:

- test the validity of their new understanding of concepts,
- apply new concepts to novel contexts, and
- articulate the process through which they can learn new concepts.

STANDARDIZED TEST PREPARATION

Another purpose for direct vocabulary instruction is to prepare students for success on standardized tests of verbal ability. To perform well on standardized tests, students must not only have a wide range of vocabulary knowledge but also the ability to apply a variety of strategies to determine the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary they might encounter on a test.

To prepare students for standardized testing, teachers can guide students through analyses of samples to help them understand how tests measure vocabulary knowledge⁶. For example, to prepare for the recently revised SAT[®], instruction can focus on word-learning strategies that students can use to determine “the meaning of words in extended contexts and on how authors’ word choices can shape the meaning, tone, and impact” of text⁷. In the case of SAT preparation, then, students might practice their word-analysis skills as well as the principles of close reading.



Vocabulary Workshop Achieve, Level E

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Direct instruction of an academic discipline’s conceptual vocabulary requires more than memorizing a word’s definition and/or analyzing its structure. To ensure that direct instruction of academic vocabulary is effective, teachers need to be well-informed about vocabulary development; the role that academic vocabulary plays in learning; the processes, skills, and strategies that contribute to deep word learning; and the role that word consciousness and metacognition play in vocabulary acquisition⁸. To engage students’ interest in academic vocabulary, teachers need to demonstrate personal enthusiasm for and curiosity about words, and provide students with language-rich classroom environments that encourage inquiry about words and word learning. Finally, teachers need to provide students with multiple opportunities to encounter, study, integrate, and apply their growing knowledge of words, of the concepts they represent, and of the strategies that support word learning in reading, writing, speaking, and listening over a variety of genres and over time⁹.

The design and implementation of effective, direct vocabulary instruction is labor intensive, multi-faceted, and requires a long-term commitment. It is explicitly purposeful and well-integrated throughout curricula—within academic disciplines and across them. To design and implement cross-curricular vocabulary instruction, teachers need to come to a common understanding about how vocabulary and vocabulary learning “works.” They also need to agree upon the purposes for vocabulary instruction as well as the skills and strategies students need to become independent word-learners¹⁰. In short, there are no “quick-fixes” for the inadequacy of current vocabulary instruction; however, given the impact that effective vocabulary instruction has on students’ reading and academic achievement, the time and effort necessary to re-imagine vocabulary instruction is more than worthwhile—it is critical.



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