

Academic Vocabulary Builds Student Achievement

Academic vocabulary is one of the strongest indicators of how well students will learn subject area content. Unfortunately, vocabulary development can be an afterthought in content area classrooms. Educators and experts discuss strategies for helping students acquire academic vocabulary in every classroom.

Complex texts. Rigor. Higher standards. Every year, the stakes are raised in the content area classrooms. Nancy Guth, supervisor of literacy and humanities in Stafford County Public Schools, says, "We need the tools to meet this challenge."

Vicki Urquhart, author of the ASCD book *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas, 3rd Ed.*, says she hears from professors that students come to college unprepared to participate in a high level of discourse. "They don't have the vocabulary, they don't know how to process or discuss what they've read," says Urquhart.

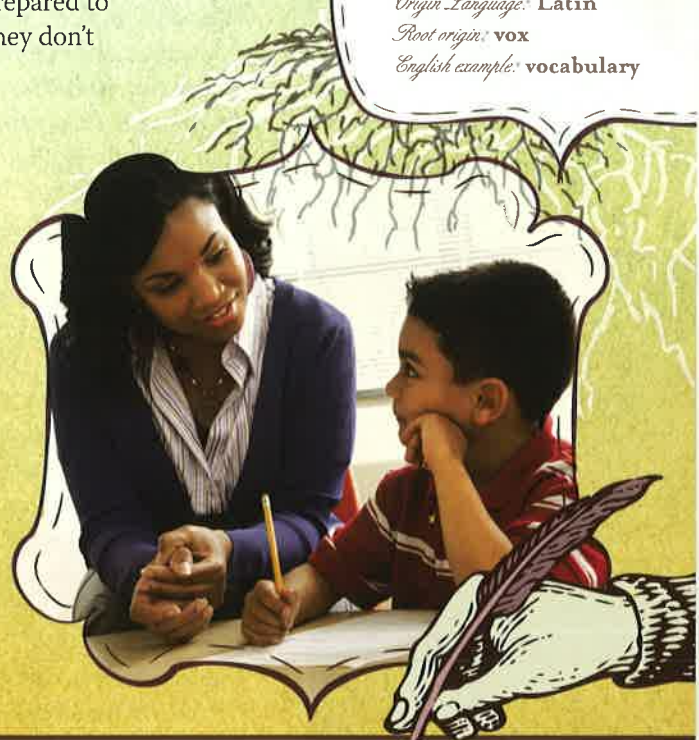
Reading and writing in the subject areas are powerful strategies for content acquisition. Through appropriate literacy activities, students have opportunities to interact constructively with content, to create internal representations of content through reading, and then refine that representation through writing processes like synthesis, evaluation, and summarization. Both reading-to-learn and writing-to-learn are meaning-making activities that result in understanding. But there is a key, often underserved component of teaching reading and writing in the content areas: vocabulary knowledge.

Vocabulary expert and Kent State University professor emeritus Nancy Padak says, "There's a strong, statistical link between a person's vocabulary knowledge and students' comprehension ability; and there's a very strong link between these two and academic success."

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Root: **voc**
Meaning in English: **voice**
Origin Language: **Latin**
Root origin: **vox**
English example: **vocabulary**



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Use Simple Steps to Build Vocab

In Stafford County, Guth says teaching academic vocabulary was a challenge. “Our high schools’ SAT and ACT scores dipped—we were struggling with how to help kids access the vocabulary that is the key to reading comprehension on those tests,” she states. Guth needed a program that would shore up vocabulary learning across content areas.

As a backdrop to Guth’s common concerns, there’s a prevailing notion that plagues content-area classrooms: the myth that words teach themselves. Research shows that inductive or incidental approaches to vocabulary exposure fall short because context alone is seldom sufficient to allow students to conceptualize unknown words. Also, student conceptualizations, especially for technical terms, lack the precision needed to understand new words. In addition, students may not encounter technical terms frequently enough to accumulate an adequate number of examples of the term.

In *Building Academic Vocabulary*, Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering advocate for a six-step process for vocabulary development:

Step 1: Teacher presents the term in “student-friendly” language (including descriptions, examples, and nonlinguistic representations of the term).

Step 2: Students restate the term in their own words (linking the new word to known experiences and background knowledge).

Step 3: Students represent the term in graphic form (reinforcing and deepening understanding through processing in a second modality).

Step 4: Students use the term in other contexts (deepening meaning by applying the term in new situations, through writing or conversation).

Step 5: Students discuss the term with peers (building understanding as a class, and augmenting this knowledge with new discoveries about the word).

Step 6: Vocabulary games give students more exposure to the term (serving as continued review in ways that engage multiple modalities for learning).

Larry Ferlazzo, English language learner (ELL) teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif., helps build students’ vocabulary by using simple word charts that include student-created drawings and by allowing students to use physical gestures to represent word meaning. Ferlazzo describes a simple way to preteach academic vocabulary:

First introduce a small number of key words, then have students work in groups to see if they know any of them. Follow with the use of drawings and physical gestures (for example, with the word “fact” the teacher could point to the ground and stomp her foot, and with the word “opinion” she could point to her mind). Lastly, include sentence stems where students can apply the newly-learned words (perhaps in a question/answer mode with partners). For example:

Q: “We are in a classroom. Is that a fact or an opinion?”

A: “‘We are in a classroom’ is a fact.”

Ferlazzo adds that ELLs might also write a translation of the new words in their home language. He emphasizes that strategies for preteaching academic vocabulary benefit both ELL and non-ELL students.

Time, Expertise, and Relevance

For content area teachers, comprehensive, research-based approaches can seem daunting in terms of the time and expertise needed to enact them with fidelity and precision. In some cases, there is also the concern that this sort of instruction should be the sole purview of the English/Language Arts teacher.

“Time is a big issue,” admits Padak. “We’ve already got a curriculum that is jam-packed, so if we just tell students to go memorize these words, then we can kind of pretend we’re doing what they need for vocabulary—even though we know better,” she says.

Urquhart thinks it’s really teachers’ lack of comfort that keeps them from delivering reading and writing strategies. Padak sees something to that theory. She suggests that maybe the real problem is that content area teachers haven’t been carefully and systematically exposed to good alternatives to handing out the weekly vocabulary list.

“When you adopt a more constructivist approach to vocabulary instruction, there is a pretty steep learning curve for teachers *and* students,” Padak says. “It’s going to take some time; it’s a whole different way of doing vocabulary both in terms of how teachers have taught, and how they were taught, as students. From a PD perspective, if you hope for change in this area, you need to be in it for the long haul.”

Video: Learn from the experts! Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering share strategies for building academic vocabulary. Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the video.

Don’t have a smartphone? Go to www.ascd.org/eu-nov12-vocab to watch the video.

What’s a QR code? Learn more about how to use QR codes at www.ascd.org/qrcodes.



A Return to Our Roots

In the Summer 2012 *Educational Leadership* article “Vocabulary: Five Common Misconceptions” Padak and colleagues address misconceptions about vocabulary instruction. One is that studying Latin and Greek roots is too hard for young learners.

“More than 60 percent of academic words have word parts (also called morphemes or roots) that always carry the same meaning. Knowing that words can be broken down into meaning units is a powerful strategy for vocabulary development,” write Padak, Rasinki, Newton, and Bromley.

Adhering to this logic, Stafford Public Schools developed the “Root of the Week” initiative, which is spearheaded by high school literacy coaches and enacted across the district. Each week, the coaches introduce a new Latin or Greek root word. Over the course of the week, coaches work with content area teachers to embed this vocabulary instruction through stories, posters, and events.

“At first, content area teachers were hesitant,” Guth says of the initiative. “But when we introduced that the first root was “chron-” and the second was “dec-”; they immediately saw the connections. From science to world languages to family life to automotive classes, when you’re reading manuals or technical vocabulary, everything comes from a Greek or Latin root.”

“Helping kids get a handle on what roots mean is going to help them learn the vocabulary of science, social studies, and so on,” says Padak. “And really, those [root] words are labels for concepts. If you can help teachers see that what they’re doing is helping kids learn the concepts of their discipline, then it makes a whole lot more sense to content area teachers.”

Guth adds that the Common Core State Standards’ focus on informational texts goes hand-in-glove with root study.



Example: Root of the Week

a-, ab-, abs-
“away, from”

EXAMPLES

averse: opposed to; have a dislike for it

aberration: a deviation; an abnormality

abstract: expressing a quality drawn away from an object

absent: not present or existing; missing; lacking

Source: Pamela Smith, Literacy Coach, North Stafford High School, Stafford, Va.

Greek and Latin Roots in the Common Core State Standards

Root-specific standards are located in the “Foundational Skills” and “Language/Vocabulary Acquisition and Use” sections of the standards.

Sample standards, grades K–5:

- Use most frequent inflections and affixes as clues to meaning (K)
- Identify common root words (begins at grade 1)
- Use common prefixes and compound words (begins at grade 2)
- Use affixes and root words (begins at grade 3)
- Identify and know meaning of common prefixes and derivational suffixes (begins at grade 3)
- Decode words with common Latin suffixes (begins at grade 3)
- Use combined knowledge of [phonics] and morphology—e.g., roots and affixes (begins at grade 4)
- Know and use common Greek and Latin roots (begins at grade 4)

Sample standards, grades 6–12:

- Determine or clarify meaning of unknown or multiple meaning words by . . . analyzing word parts (begins at grade 6)
- Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes (begins at grade 6)
- Identify and correctly use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech—e.g., conceive, conception, conceivable (begins at grade 9)
- Acquire and use accurately general, academic, and domain-specific words (begins at grade 9)
- Demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge (begins at grade 9)

For more information about these Common Core standards, see <http://www.corestandards.org>.

Source: Adapted with permission from Nancy Padak, npadak@kent.edu.

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Urquhart agrees. She generally sees a higher profile for academic vocabulary instruction heralded by the Common Core. "Reading and writing skills parallel all the content area standards in the Common Core," explains Urquhart. "When you bring them together, they support each other; they're the full package for learning that content."

"Helping kids develop a more robust academic vocabulary is all over the Common Core standards," says Padak. "Having kids work with more challenging texts is all over the standards, as well, and in order to do that, you have to have the academic vocabulary."

But what about time? "In terms of instructional time, our advice is 10 minutes a day ought to do it," says Padak. And the payoff? "This year, our ACT scores are above the state and national average, and one of the highest in the state of Virginia," says Guth. "Our scores continue to rise even as our number of students who take the test also rises." Stafford County has expanded its root study program to the middle schools, and is dabbling with the idea of introducing it at the elementary level, as a complement to their larger, word study program.

Words Your Way

There are plenty of free online tools out there to help students reinforce academic vocabulary. On his blog, Ferlazzo lists several of these resources (<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2008/04/06/the-best-websites-for-developing-academic-english-skills-vocabulary>). An added benefit of online tools is that they're a place for ELLs to practice and make mistakes privately, he notes.

Teaching academic vocabulary can feel empowering. "Now, content area teachers actually seek us out and say, 'Hey, we haven't seen the root of the week yet!'" says Guth. "One of our schools has it on its digital marquee as you drive by: 'Ask your kids about the root of the week.' The school board members joke that we'll cause accidents because everyone slows down as they drive past. It's gotten to be a community event," Guth says.

"It's not just one more thing piled onto content area teachers," Guth adds. "It's fun that translates into learning." **EU**

—LAURA VARLAS