

Enhanced Vocabulary Instruction: Using Vocabulary to Teach More than Meaning

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Abstract

While many students arrive to middle school lacking fundamental reading skills, traditional English language arts curriculum and methods fail to address the needs of struggling readers. In fact, secondary English teachers often focus on helping students understand texts without the students actually reading the texts rather than building students' reading skills. In this article, the author shares a procedure for vocabulary instruction that also promotes phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, and orthographic mapping.

Keywords

vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, orthographic mapping, spelling, phonics, middle school literacy

According to *The Nation's Report Card*, 37% of 8th graders scored at the proficient level in reading on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2017, para. 1). The Kansas Department of Education reports that 8th graders in Kansas score only slightly higher than the national average (Bush, 2018). Therefore, middle school English language arts teachers often find that over half their students lack the skills needed to read and comprehend grade level texts independently. As a result, many ELA teachers resort to teaching methods that take student reading out the equation, using teacher read-aloud and audiobooks as a replacement for student reading. Although such methods certainly play a role in literacy instruction, we cannot expect students to develop reading skills if they are not, in fact, reading. For this reason, an effective middle school ELA classroom must include instruction in fundamental reading skills in addition to addressing literature and writing standards.

In 1999 the National Reading Panel identified five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Shanahan, 2005). Secondary ELA teachers have typically assumed that the first three components lie in the domain of elementary reading instruction and have directed their attention primarily to vocabulary and comprehension instruction. However, recent research on the reading brain indicates that reading instruction has relied far too much on teaching students to guess at words using context clues and not enough on teaching students use their knowledge of sounds and letters to decode words (Hanford, 2019). Most research attention has been directed at early literacy, for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, as David A. Kilpatrick observes, even older students can show growth following instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics and with the opportunity to read connected text (2015, p. 13). Because intensive intervention requires a significant amount of time with a low teacher to student ratio, such intervention is typically beyond the scope of the regular ELA classroom; however, classroom teachers can still integrate instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics into their existing curriculum. In this article, I will share a vocabulary routine I use in my 6th and 8th grade classes that incorporates phonemic and phonological awareness, phonics, and spelling with word knowledge to promote orthographic mapping. Since implementing the orthographic mapping component to my vocabulary routine, the percentage of my 6th and 8th grade students testing on grade level has increased 15% (based on fall and winter Aimsweb screeners).

Orthographic mapping may be a new term for secondary teachers. Kilpatrick (2015) argues that our ability to read depends upon a process called "orthographic mapping." Kilpatrick defines

the term as “the process readers use to store written words for immediate, effortless retrieval. It is the means by which readers turn unfamiliar written words into familiar, instantaneously accessible sight words” (p. 81). Orthographic mapping depends on letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate sounds within words). This allows readers to connect the sounds in a word to the spelling of the word so that the word does not have to be decoded each time the reader encounters it (2015, pp. 84-87). It is also important that readers understand the word so that they have a meaning to connect to the sound and spelling (2015, p. 88). Competent readers orthographically map words automatically and unconsciously without instruction; however, struggling readers take longer to map words and as a result, do not map as many words to their sight word vocabularies.

I use the following vocabulary routine to help students not only learn the meanings of new words but also orthographically map new words to enhance their sight word vocabularies. I typically teach the same set of words over a period of one to two school weeks, and vocabulary instruction takes five to ten minutes of our class period. I select vocabulary words that are either in the text we are reading or are important for discussion of the text. (For example, when I teach *Hunger Games*, I teach words such as “dehumanize” and “injustice” even though they don’t occur in the text because they allow us to discuss the text.)

Vocabulary Introduction

I introduce vocabulary words orally. Students have not seen the words in print yet. I say each word out loud and students repeat it. I ask students first to identify how many syllables are in the word. (In the case of “dehumanize,” there are four syllables.) Then I ask students to identify the sounds (phonemes) in the word. (In the case of “dehumanize,” there are nine sounds: /d/ /E/ /h/ /U/ /m/ /a/ /n/ /I/ /z/, which are represented by 10 letters.) Students then attempt to spell the word by representing each individual phoneme. After students have finished, I ask them to look at the word, see if it looks right, and make any corrections. I then show them the correct spelling of the word. They write the correct spelling of the word, and we discuss their spellings. In some cases, students spell the word in a way that is phonetically acceptable but not standard (for example, “deehumanize,” “dehoomanize,” “dehumanize” or “dehumanise”). We discuss different ways sounds can be spelled in English and how these particular sounds are spelled in this word. This step goes very quickly once students are accustomed to the routine. Sounds and spellings are the focus of this step.

If the words are particularly difficult, I provide a brief, student-friendly definition of the word. If the words can be determined from the context of the text, students create a chart (see the example below). As they read or we read together, they write their own definition of the vocabulary words as they encounter them. If the text is short, I often begin with an interactive read aloud, and then students reread with a partner and write definitions. I recreate the chart on the whiteboard, students add their definitions, and then we work as a class to create student-friendly class definitions.

Word	Student definition	Class definition
dehumanize	Not being nice	To treat someone as less than a person

Daily Vocabulary Routine

After I have introduced the vocabulary words, I begin each subsequent class by saying each word and having the students repeat it out loud. We review the student-friendly definition. Then I

continue vocabulary development by choosing from the strategies below. I usually use one or two strategies each day, focusing on oral language skills at first and then moving to written. To see vocabulary instruction in action, readers can view Anita Archer's (2019) excellent videos on vocabulary instruction. These videos provide a model for using student-friendly examples, promoting student involvement in vocabulary instruction, and maintaining a brisk pace.

I incorporate the following strategies in my own vocabulary instruction:

1. **Oral sentences:** Each student uses the word in a complete sentence with a partner. I typically provide a sentence stem to help students use complete sentences. (I teach in a district with a significant percentage of English language learners, so this is a high priority goal for us.) I want students to have multiple experiences using the word themselves (not just listening to others use it).
2. **Actions:** If possible, we come up with an action or sound effect to accompany the word. (For example, with the word "plummet," students hold their hand up high, then turn their fingers down and lower the hand quickly.) The goal is to help students remember the word by associating it with an action.
3. **Questioning:** I ask students questions about the word that can be answered "yes" or "no." For example, I might ask, "When the Nazis compared Jews to rats, did they dehumanize the Jews?" and "If I gave you an award for good citizenship, would I dehumanize you?" I try to ask several questions for each word, with a combination of examples and non-examples. I also ask questions with forced choices--for example, "If I dehumanized you, would that make you feel proud or humiliated?" The goal here is deepening student understanding of the word. Then I move to more open-ended questions: "How might it affect a group of people to be dehumanized?"
4. **Examples:** Students share examples (and non-examples) of the word. I might ask this to the whole class or have students ask each other to give examples and then share with the whole group. For example, I might ask, "When is a time that people have been dehumanized in America?" and students can share examples.
5. **Which word:** I ask questions such as, "I'm thinking of a word that means "to treat someone like less than a person. What word am I thinking of?"
6. **Word reading:** Students take turns reading the words to a partner, either from flash cards or a word list. The goal is to have students practice reading the word to connect the sound of the word with its spelling.
7. **Word study:** We discuss word parts. For example, "dehumanize" contains the prefix "de-," the root word "human," and the suffix "-ize." We discuss how these words parts help us understand the meaning and decode the word when we first encounter it. We also discuss related word forms—dehumanization, dehumanized, human, humanize, humanity. This helps students recognize related words instead of having to decode them each time and promotes understanding of prefixes and suffixes.
8. **Sound-spelling:** I ask students how specific sounds are spelled in the word, particularly if the spelling is unusual. For example, in the word "hyperbole," the /E/ sound is spelled with

an “e,” which is an unusual spelling in English (since a final “e” in English is usually a silent e accompanying a long vowel sound) but common in Greek (and hyperbole is a word that came to us from Greek). This promotes orthographic mapping and spelling skills.

9. **Word writing:** Students write the words to practice spelling and promote orthographic mapping. I always have them copy the words first with the correct spellings visible. Then I have them write them “spelling test” style--I dictate the word and they spell the word. We analyze misspellings according to sound.

10. **Written extensions:** I might have students draw pictures to illustrate vocabulary words, create or complete graphic organizers such as the Frayer model, complete sketchnotes, answer written questions, or write sentences or paragraphs using the word. The goal is to move from oral knowledge of the word to the ability to use it in writing.

The following chart reflects a sample week of vocabulary instruction:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
I say, students spell words	I say, students repeat words	I say, students repeat words	Students say words to a partner	Students read words from flashcards to a partner
Correct student spellings to standard spellings	Discuss prefixes, suffixes, unusual spellings	Review student friendly definitions with actions	Which word?	Word writing
Student friendly definitions	Review student friendly definitions with actions	Questioning	Examples	Writing extension of one or two words
Add actions to words				

When teaching vocabulary, I try to keep the following the following principles in mind:

- Students need to say the words out loud (not just the teacher). Students don’t learn how to pronounce a word correctly from simply listening. This also promotes engagement and interaction.
- Students need to read the words out loud (not just repeat them). This promotes orthographic mapping.
- Students need repeated exposure to words. Some students learn words quickly, but many students to see, hear, and use word many times before the words become part of their sight word vocabulary and lexicon. Ideally, students will encounter multiple texts using the same vocabulary words. Sometimes, we’re lucky enough to have textbooks that provide this for us. When we’re not, we may need to design our lessons so that students will be exposed to words they’ve learned before.

Vocabulary instruction is a key part of any well-designed ELA program. The above strategies can be incorporated into existing vocabulary instruction to promote students’ phonological awareness, orthographic mapping, and spelling skills in addition to their vocabulary knowledge. Obviously, this is only one component of classroom literacy instruction. However, for a small time investment, it pays off in the development of multiple skills and student achievement. By increasing

students' vocabulary and bank of automatically recognized sight words, we can improve their overall reading skills as they confront increasingly complex texts.

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