



The Reading Room: Tips and Tricks

The Importance of Vocabulary: Part 3

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This month's Reading Room Article finds us in Part 3 of our vocabulary series. In this article, we will be taking a closer look at defining the words that we teach. Unfortunately, there are many flaws with the more common ways we teach vocabulary.

Usually, students are provided dictionary definitions and asked to create a sentence or answer questions about the target word, but there are problems with this very narrow approach to teaching vocabulary. You have to admit, dictionaries haven't really changed since the early 1800s. Definitions in a dictionary must be short and concise because of space restrictions. Plus, dictionary definitions are usually NOT helpful because there are several things that get in the way of understanding word meanings. Let's look at some ways dictionaries actually hinder vocabulary development.

Weak Differentiation

The definition does not differentiate how the target word is different from other similar words.

- Dictionary definition: ***Conspicuous - easily seen***

How does this differ from the general domain of the word visible? Unless it is dark or you have vision problems, most things are easily seen. Conspicuous is not just easy to see, it actually "pops" out at you because of a particular attribute.

Vague Language

Provides little information

- Dictionary Definition: ***Typical - being a type***

What type? Type of What? Students might not make enough sense of the definition to develop an idea of what typical means.

There is a More Likely Interpretation

This is when a definition uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways.

- Dictionary Definition: ***Devious - straying from the right course; not straightforward***

Students might interpret the definition with a very literal meaning. The student might think that devious has to do with crooked walking or getting lost. For example, "The boy was devious on his bike." - not the meaning intended.

Multiple Pieces of Information

These definitions offer no guidance in how information should be combined and used.

- Dictionary Definition: ***Exotic - foreign; strange; not native***

How would students use this information to derive meaning? What if something is strange but not foreign? Does it have to be both? The concept of exotic needs to be that when something is exotic, it may be strange, unusual, or special because it comes from a different or distant place.

So, what does this word really mean?

To promote student learning of a word, introduce new vocabulary by explaining a word's meaning rather than providing a definition for the word.

Student Friendly Definitions

Giving a definition is not easy even if we know what the word means. Therefore, there are two things to remember when giving student friendly definitions.

- Capture the essence of the word and how it is typically used
- Explain the meaning in everyday language

When developing definitions, try to use learner's dictionaries developed specifically for students learning English as a second language. These dictionaries can be useful to all students, and they provide explanations for words in more accessible language than traditional definitions. For example: Defiant - If you are defiant, you show aggression or independence by refusing to obey someone or by refusing to behave in the expected way.

There are many things to consider when developing vocabulary. Make word meanings explicit and clear. Develop student-friendly explanations for discussing word meanings. Get students actively involved with thinking about and using the meanings in the right way. Realize that full understanding and appropriate use of new words develops gradually, but a strong start is essential to allowing those processes to occur

Activities to Teach Vocabulary

Examples / Non-Examples

Present descriptions of situations and ask students to respond as to whether or not it illustrates the target word. Students should always be ready to explain "Why?"

- If I say something that sounds precarious, say "Precarious." If not, don't say anything.
 - Walking over a rickety bridge that spans a deep canyon
 - Exploring a new school building.
 - Standing on a tall ladder on one foot

Word Associations

Ask students to come up with an association. It can be a person, a movie, or a common experience for the target word. They have to explain the connection they made.

<i>Word</i>	<i>Association</i>	<i>Reason / Explanation</i>
Eloquent	President Kennedy	Kennedy was an excellent speaker, and people still talk about his speeches.
Pervasive	Computer viruses	Viruses seem to be all over the place, and you always have to be on the watch for them.
Fidelity	Having the same best friend all your life	You are always faithful to that person.

Generating Situation, Contexts, and Examples

The questions below require developing situations across various contexts.

- What might a ***clever*** dog learn to do when its owner comes home?
- What would a ***splendid*** day for ducks look like?
- Why is eating leftovers a ***frugal*** thing to do?
- Why might you ***examine*** an apple you found on the street?

Word Relationships

Have students to describe how two vocabulary words might be connected or related.

Conscientious / haphazard -

- Someone who is conscientious would not do things in a haphazard way.

Compassionate / advocate -

- A compassionate lawyer might act as an advocate for someone who is in need and otherwise could not afford a lawyer.

Writing

As students move into upper grades, vocabulary instruction should include having them use their words in writing.

- Provide students with sentence frames or stems, and ask them to complete them.
 - The King was ***miserable*** because...
 - The queen was ***calm*** because...
 - The child was ***perplexed*** because...

Returning to the Story Context

Reinforce the connection between understanding vocabulary and understanding story ideas.

- In his epilogue, Christopher Paul Curtis wrote: “In the Northern, Eastern, and Western states, African Americans often faced **discrimination**, but it was not as extreme and pervasive as in the South” (p. 207).
 - What did he mean?
 - Find examples of discrimination mentioned in the novel.

Puzzles and Activities

Provide clues for vocabulary words. Clues should narrow the range of possible responses.

- ***Spectator, reliable, or relinquish***
 1. A lot of people would not actually see this person.
 2. It’s someone who just watches.
 3. The word has nine letters and starts with an s.

Helpful Resources

Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (Sinclair, 1987). Free online version

Longman (Delacroix et al., 2007)

Onelook.com - brings definitions from dozens of dictionaries to you.

Resources & Activities

Bringing Words to Life, by Isabel Beck

Vocabulary.com

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