Chapter 11

Improving Vocabulary at the Secondary Level: History, Literature, and Findings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the need for valid and reliable vocabulary instruction at the secondary level. As climate and demographics continue to change the education landscape, there will be a continued need for further research on best practices for vocabulary. Currently, students’ vocabulary knowledge at the secondary level is lacking, specifically in the content areas, and teachers need instructional strategies that they can put into practice. The research currently available indicated this is an important subject and support for instruction is needed. Therefore, this chapter proves there is such a need.

INTRODUCTION

Since the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) published their Report to the National Reading Panel (2000) and included vocabulary as one of the five pillars of reading, there has been a growing interest in vocabulary development and instruction. Educators have come to understand that vocabulary is a critical component to success in all academic areas (Harmon & Wood, 2008). This understanding has led to many questions about what vocabulary instruction is and how it should be taught in the classroom, and, as a result, research continues to be conducted. A recent search of the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database resulted in over 2200 articles with the key words ‘vocabulary development’ from 2000-2008 alone, as well as several new books (Beck, McKown, & Kucan, 2002; Graves, 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2005) in the last ten years. Given the current focus on high stakes testing, educators are seeking ways to increase students’ vocabulary knowledge, especially for academic vocabulary using informational text (Moss, 2005).

As educators are facing more pressure for their students to perform well on state testing, they are also faced with having to teach content specific...
vocabulary. Yopp and Yopp (2007) remind us that vocabulary knowledge is necessary for reading comprehension and needs to be addressed across the curriculum in a focused and deliberate manner. While some educators rely on students comprehending words by reading from a wide variety of books to learn this new vocabulary, there still needs to be explicit instruction as well as word learning strategies (Yopp & Yopp, 2007).

Beyond meeting the needs of the on-level student, an educator needs to have methods and strategies to assist struggling readers to improve their vocabulary so that they can succeed in class and on high stakes tests. Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, and Watts-Taffe (2006) reported that historically it has been agreed that vocabulary knowledge does predict comprehension. This means educators need effective instructional strategies to meet the needs of students, specifically struggling readers: English Language Learners (ELL), Special Education (SE) students and those who are economically disadvantaged (ED).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

At the secondary level educators have been tasked with not only delivering content for that area, but also ensuring that the content specific vocabulary needed to comprehend and be successful is taught. Research has shown that gaps in reading performance are often associated with the gaps in vocabulary, yet there is little attention to developing language in most schools (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). With this new era of high stakes testing, educators are pressured to raise test scores and passing rates, but are receiving limited instructional support to make this happen. Educators are left trying to find effective strategies and best practice activities to use in the classroom that will have a positive impact on their students.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore current strategies for teaching vocabulary in the classroom. As a result of the extensive research on vocabulary instruction, this article addresses the following questions:

1. What research based methods are proven effective to teach vocabulary?
2. What effective instructional methods are utilized by educators to teach content specific vocabulary?

Understanding the answers to these questions will help educators support all students, specifically the struggling readers in their classroom.

Significance of the Problem

When looking at why students are not successful on high-stakes testing, it comes back to their lack of vocabulary associated with the topic. Gregg, Coleman, Davis and Chalk (2007) noted that word knowledge has a significant influence on decoding and comprehension performance and this is a large determiner of student achievement on high stakes tests. With a vocabulary gap present, a student’s chance of performing well on any test that requires reading is decreased. Stahl (1999) noted that vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension play a critical role in improving the development of an educated person as well as improving high stakes testing scores.

Educators are searching for the means to teach vocabulary in the classroom that will make the difference for their students. There have been many books published in the last few years focusing on vocabulary building (Glazier, Friend, & Knight, 2007; Marzano & Pickering, 2005) and lists of words that students should know (Beech, 2003; Einhorn & Traumbauer, 2004; Editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries, 2010). While these resources should prove helpful to educators, they instead cause more strain as an educator tries to wade through them all to find the best strategies to use in their classroom. Blachowicz et al. (2006) noted that while there have been several