

Suggestions for Integrating Vocabulary Study

Research has helped us understand some key points about vocabulary instruction:

- Vocabulary knowledge is closely tied to reading comprehension.
- Vocabulary knowledge can be acquired through incidental learning of word meanings from context.
- Direct instruction is more effective than incidental learning for acquisition of specific vocabulary.
- Instruction that relates new vocabulary to existing structures may be more effective than instruction using definitions.
- Instruction using context may be more effective for teaching new vocabulary than instruction using definitions.

What this means is that vocabulary instruction should provide multiple exposures to new words. It should provide both context and definitions for new words, should help students relate new vocabulary to their background knowledge, should provide for active student involvement, should help students develop elaborate understandings of new words, and should help students develop conscious strategies for acquiring new vocabulary.

Teachers are quick to realize that vocabulary instruction can quickly become one of the least interesting aspects of language arts instruction, and so many seek ways to fold vocabulary development into literature instruction. However, a great danger lies in forgetting that literature is produced to provide readers with intellectual interest and aesthetic pleasures. Instruction should never reduce the literary text to a handmaiden for vocabulary development.

Ms. Rief uses a collaborative approach to vocabulary instruction and learning. She assigns each student a word (given with page numbers; alternately, students could self-select their words) that she feels will be helpful in their discussion. Students write the word on one side of a card in large letters with the sentence in which it appears in the book and a definition that fits the context. On the other side of the card, they illustrate the word in some way and write a brief etymology. They become the class "expert" on that word and as the class moves through the book, students report on the words as they are encountered. The process is low key and student centered. It focuses on meaning in context; the vocabulary is used as a means to enhance understanding, and because each student is responsible for only one word, even the least-able student contributes productively.