

DCN FORUM

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In our Spring 2007 edition, we began discussion of the five focus areas for reading instruction derived from the synthesis of research by the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000). In that issue we discussed Phonemic Awareness, Phonics and Fluency. In this issue, we continue with the two remaining areas: Vocabulary and Comprehension.

Meeting the Challenge: A Focus on Reading

The NRP research focuses on reading instruction broadly, yet each area is relevant for the special educator. As our students begin to decode better and become more fluent readers, these remaining areas become increasingly important. These two areas are equally important for the low reader with an accommodation allowing orally presented information. Vocabulary and comprehension are key to "getting" the concepts and ideas, from both literature and content area text; that is understanding the presented ideas, and the relationship between those ideas, regardless of the mode of presentation. Stated simply, vocabulary is about accurate labeling of concepts and learning to comprehend is learning to think.

Vocabulary: Accurate and precise labels for ideas and concepts.

Can we find the most accurate word to describe what we're talking about? Do we have to understand the word meaning precisely to get the idea? How much instruction and practice for words is needed? What words should be taught? Can students learn words incidentally? These are the instructional considerations for vocabulary development. Researchers and curriculum developers provide four key areas to address for vocabulary development:

- *Provide a rich and varied language experiences: Children do learn words incidentally by exposure, through context and situations. Students need to know the context in which to use a word, as well as its actual meaning.*
- *Teach individual words and word families: Systematic and direct instruction helps increase vocabulary. Focus on words with the greatest utility. Thematic instruction and groups of related words help students remember words in related groups or categories and recall them more effectively.*
- *Teach word learning strategies: Students learn how to improve their own strategies of word learning through dictionary work, and learning how to use context clues to determine word meaning.*
- *Promote word consciousness: The key to incidental learning is noticing a new word and investigating how it is used. Developing this questioning and "noticing" is promoted through the modeling of curiosity and research.*

Students with learning disabilities frequently require shortened and modified vocabulary list assignments to focus on the more useful words from the unit or novel being studied. Remember, the precept of *less is more!* Ensure that students' study time won't be diluted by assigning too much. The end result will be more words known.

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Comprehension Instruction: Teaching students to think...Organizing and relating ideas.

Most content material and concepts are organized using four basic cognitive structures, which in turn are the basis for most writing. Modeling, instruction and repeated practice with these patterns will support comprehension of subject material as well as serve as a model for writing assignments. Graphic organizers make the structure explicit. these essential patterns are (in approximate order of complexity):

- **Sequence:** When the order of events is the most critical text feature. Useful for fiction and non-fiction.
- **Compare-contrast:** Organize similarities and differences within and between texts, concepts. Also serves well for vocabulary refinement.
- **Cause-effect:** To promote inference, to deepen understanding of "cause" and "effect," and reinforce the linguistic concepts and correct usage of the words, *why* and *because*.
- **Hierarchy** (main idea/essential detail): To teach students how to identify main ideas and determine pertinent details. This is one of later developing cognitive structures and relies on understanding the relationship between ideas.

Choose the structure based on the subject being taught. Cause-effect is a major pattern for social studies and science. Compare-contrast can be used for literature, vocabulary, history (e.g., culture of Romans vs. Greeks) and science (e.g., types of cells). Graphic organizers for each of these structures are available on the Diagnostic Center North website under Curriculum Relevant Therapy.

At all levels, the process of the teacher "think-aloud" provides students with a window into how to think about ideas and their connections with background information and other ideas in the text. This explicit modeling is a direct demonstration. As students work together in text with the teacher, self-monitoring and re-reading to clarify ideas can be modelled and practiced.

Resources

Brand, M. (2004). *Word savvy: Integrated vocabulary, spelling, and word study*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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Lublimer, S. (2005). *Getting into words: Vocabulary instruction that strengthens comprehension*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.

Tovani, C. (2000). *I read it, but I don't get it: Comprehension strategies for adolescent readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.