

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 417

CS 009 809

TITLE Vocabulary. English Language Arts Concept Paper  
Number 7.

INSTITUTION Oregon State Dept. of Education, Salem.

PUB DATE Jun 89

NOTE 9p.

PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)  
-- Collected Works - Serials (022)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; \*Learning Strategies;  
Models; Reading Comprehension; Student Development;  
Teacher Role; \*Vocabulary Development; \*Vocabulary  
Skills

IDENTIFIERS Oregon

ABSTRACT

Stressing that building vocabulary knowledge is a continuously developing skill, acquired over a lifetime and in a variety of ways, this concept paper suggests instructional strategies that lead to word knowledge. Following a research summary and a section on implications for instructions, the paper focuses on the various instructional strategies which the teacher can choose. A section on developing independent skills offers a step-by-step vocabulary overview guide as a model for students to use on their own to learn word meanings. A 23-item bibliography is attached. (NKA)

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# English Language Arts

## Concept Paper

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Number 7

The goal of vocabulary instruction is for students to learn the pronunciation and meaning of words, thus enhancing comprehension. Word knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension. Students who do well on vocabulary tests do well on reading comprehension tests (Anderson and Freebody, 1981). In content areas, knowing the specialized vocabulary is crucial for understanding the subject (Bragstad and others, 1987).

***"Building vocabulary knowledge is a continuously developing skill. It is acquired gradually over a lifetime and in a variety of ways."***

"The richer one's storehouse of vocabulary, the more one is able to deal with a variety of concepts" (Smith, 1988). Word recognition is discussed in the "Reading" Concept Paper of this series. This paper deals with learning the meaning of words.

What does "learn the meaning of words" entail? How do teachers know when sufficient learning has taken place? "Vocabulary knowledge implies a rich understanding of the word" (Marzano and Marzano, 1988). "At the simple level, students know a word by definition; at the complex level, they associate experiences with the word" (Vacca, 1986). Pearson (1985) calls this complex level "knowing a word in its fullest sense," and Beck (1984) calls it "owning a word." Knowing a word well enough to pass a multiple choice test does not mean the student knows it well enough to comprehend it in context (Beck & others, 1982).

Building vocabulary knowledge is a continuously developing skill. It is acquired gradually over a lifetime and in a variety of ways (Center for the Study of Reading, 1986). Learning to know a word in all of its rich nuances and facets occurs in the same way that one gets to know another person: over time and with many experiences together.

Researchers and educators both agree on the impor-

tance of vocabulary knowledge to reading comprehension. Current research is beginning to give us a better understanding of the instructional strategies that will build this knowledge. (Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986).

### Breadth of Word Knowledge

Several studies measuring the effect of vocabulary instruction on growth of reading comprehension conclude that teaching only definitions or context clues generally fails to produce an increase in understanding of text (Mezynski, 1983, Stahl and Fairbanks, 1986). Researchers determined that these methods did not produce the in-depth word knowledge that is necessary for reading comprehension to take place.

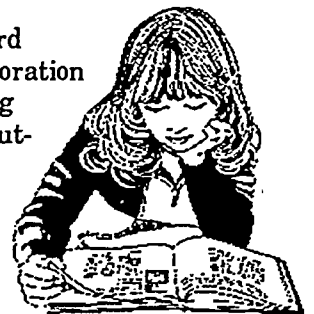
Mezynski (1983), in her review of research, found several factors that did relate to successful vocabulary instruction. These factors include the amount of practice given in learning the word, the breadth of training in the use of the word, and the degree to which active processing was encouraged. Similarly, McKeown and others (1985) noted that the successful procedures included:

- frequent encounters with a word
- rich instruction involving elaboration and discussion of word meaning
- opportunities to use the word outside the classroom.

Nagy (1988) describes intensive vocabulary instruction as that which integrates instructed work with other knowledge, provides multiple encounters with the new word and requires learners to use the word meaningfully.

### Choosing Words for Intensive Instruction

It is obvious that this type of intensive instruction can not be provided for the estimated 88,500 words stu-



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dents encounter. Most word meanings are learned through reading. However, numerous words require intensive vocabulary instruction for real comprehension to occur. Words requiring intensive instruction represent complex concepts that are:

- not necessarily part of the students' experience
- one of a group of words with related meaning
- important to the understanding of the selection
- frequently encountered (Nagy, 1988) (Moore, 1987).

Stahl (1986) suggests that this list can be further narrowed by determining whether the context already does an adequate job of providing the meaning and whether the words represent concepts that are relatively close to known words. Also, less intensive instruction is needed for words that are in the students' oral vocabulary (Graves and Penn, 1986). Intensive instruction, then, will be provided for a finite number of words.

The level of the students' understanding of a word also determines the type of instruction needed. Students may have only a general understanding of the meaning or they may know only one of the meanings. (Center for the Study of Reading, 1986).

***"The challenge in vocabulary instruction with students of all ages is in teaching new words in ways that enhance comprehension."***

Fluency in recognizing the meaning is another factor. Word knowledge can range from complete unfamiliarity with the word, to having to pause to recall the word's meaning, to automatic knowledge of the meaning (Beck & McKeown, 1983).

In spite of careful attention to narrowing the list for intensive instruction, the number of words that students must understand throughout their lives is still much greater than instructional time will allow. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to help students to become independent word learners (Nagy, 1988) (Moore, 1987).

### Visual Representations

As a means to activate prior knowledge and to show the relationship of words, a number of researchers have examined the value of organizing related words in various patterns such as webs or structured overviews. These visual representations have been found useful, but students who produce these organizers following reading do better than those students who only have contact with them prior to the reading. In addition Vacca and others (1987) agree that the use of pictures to make words more concrete or to create visual mem-

ory associations for word meanings has been shown to be effective.

## MOROSE

Definition: Having a sullen and gloomy disposition.



**Synonyms**  
 glum  
 mournful  
 sorrowful  
 sad

**Antonyms**  
 happy  
 joyful  
 elated  
 triumphant  
 jocular

The challenge in vocabulary instruction with students of all ages is in teaching new words in ways that enhance comprehension. The acquisition of definitional knowledge of new words is not the goal of vocabulary instruction.

### Implications for Instruction

A variety of successful strategies may be employed for instruction and for selecting the vocabulary words to be learned.

1. First and foremost, encourage students to read and provide time for them to do so. Vocabulary instruction should not take so much time that little is left for actual reading (Nagy, 1988).
2. Be very selective in choosing the words students should learn to the fullest conceptual level. Even though a word might be unfamiliar, if it is not important to understanding or if enough information is in the selection to explain it, intensive instruction is not needed. The most intensive instruction should be provided for words entailing new or difficult concepts or for words which should become part of the student's permanent vocabulary (Nagy, 1988). If too many of these words are in a selection, the selection is probably too difficult.
3. Provide multiple encounters with unfamiliar words in several different contexts so that students can develop a breadth of word knowledge (Carr & Wixson, 1986).
4. Teach the conceptual frameworks related to a word not just the individual word. In order to understand the word "mast" one needs to understand about sailing (McNeil, 1987).

5. Relate new words to the students' background of experience. Giving students relevant information about an unfamiliar topic appears to facilitate comprehension. However, irrelevant information does not seem to help (Stahl and others, 1989).
6. Have students become directly involved in constructing meaning rather than just memorizing definitions or synonyms (Beck and others, 1982).
7. Use a variety of instructional strategies for building word knowledge. Using definiticas alone leads to a superficial level of word knowledge. Context clues alone rarely provide complete information. Combinations of definitional, contextual and concept-based instruction are more effective than any single approach used in isolation (Nagy, 1988).
8. When teaching subject area words: (Bragstad, 1987)
  - Teach new subject matter vocabulary in context.
  - Use structural analysis (prefixes, roots, suffixes) whenever possible so students can learn families of words. Focus on patterns related to a content area where possible (i.e., "ology" suffix in science or "ism" suffix in social studies).
9. When using dictionaries: (Cooper, 1986)
  - Make provisions for extending new words into speaking, writing and thinking vocabularies.
  - Don't give long isolated lists of words for students to look up and define.
  - Show students that you often turn to a dictionary.
  - Familiarize students with the variety of information to be found in a dictionary.
10. Provide strategies for students to acquire new vocabulary independently (Carr and Wixson, 1986).
11. When determining which method of instruction to use for indepth word knowledge, one tool is to decide what you plan to do and then use the following Evaluation Matrix to help you analyze the value of the method (Carr and Wixson, 1986).

### Evaluation Matrix

Method	Does it?			
	Relate Background Knowledge	Provide Breadth of Word Knowledge	Involve Students Actively	Help Independent Learning
Word Map				
Free Form Outline (Web)				
Semantic Feature Analysis				
Other				

Depending on the level of understanding the student already has of a word or concept, the teacher can select from the following approaches.

#### Definitional Approaches (Center for the Study of Reading, 1980)

1. When using a definitional approach, choose words that are easy to define, name known concepts, and words for which the definition contains words known by students (Center for the Study of Reading, 1980).
2. Use the word in sentences and class discussions.
3. Teach students to state definitions succinctly according to a specific form (Bergstad, 1987).
  - If the word is a noun, state the word, the class it is in, and the difference between it and other words in that class. For example, "A desk is a piece of furniture that is used for writing and storage" can become a clearer definition by narrowing the class. "A desk is a piece of office or school furniture that is used for writing or storage."

- For verbs, use the infinitive form followed by a synonym or phrase: "To ratify is to approve."
- For adjectives and most adverbs, use "to be" with a synonym or phrase: "To be fatigued is to be tired out."

**"Numerous words require intensive vocabulary instruction for real comprehension to occur."**

**Context Clues Approaches**

1. When teaching students to look for context clues, use selections that contain information which permits only accurate interpretations of the unknown words.
2. Model how to use the context clues. Talk through the process you use to find adjacent words, sentences or paragraphs to help you understand the meaning.
3. Help students to decide whether there is enough information available in the context to provide the meaning (Center for the Study of Reading, 1986).

**Conceptual Approaches**

These approaches develop a broader and deeper understanding of words. Graves and Prens (1986) suggest a six-step process for concept teaching of individual words.

1. Define a new word giving its essential attributes.
2. Distinguish between the new word and similar, but different, words which students might mistake for it.
3. Give examples of the word and explain why they are examples.
4. Give nonexamples of the word and explain why they are nonexamples
5. Give students examples and nonexamples and ask them to indicate which are examples of the word and to explain why they are examples.
6. Ask students to present their own examples and nonexamples of the concept, have them discuss why some are examples and others are nonexamples, and give them feedback on their performances.

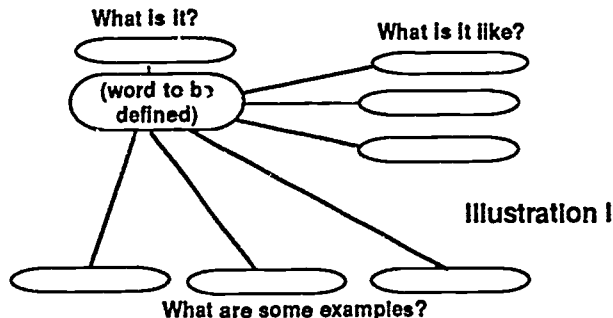
Beck and McKeown (1983) describe a procedure for teaching related words containing new concepts. It involves a variety of increasingly more difficult activi-

ties to teach a set of 8 to 10 semantically related words for one class period a week. The activities include:

1. Matching words with definitions.
2. Associating new words with a variety of contexts.
3. Creating contexts for words.
4. Comparing and contrasting words to discover relationships.
5. Using the words outside of class.

Relationships of words to one another and to prior knowledge can be shown by various visual forms. These visual forms are particularly useful if students work with them prior to, during and after reading a selection.

- Word maps are useful tools with all ages for displaying the meaning of a word, particularly nouns. Three simple questions form the basis for developing one kind of word maps: (1) What is it? (2) What is it like? (3) What are some examples? The basic structure of a word map could look like the following (Schwartz and Raphael, 1985):



- Semantic maps and webs depict attributes of a central word. These attributes are usually grouped in various clusters. An example is shown on page 6 of the Reading Concept Paper in this series.
- Semantic feature analyses matrices are used to show relationships among word meanings. Nagy (1988) describes the following matrix.

	For People	For Animals	For Storage	Big/ Fancy	Crude Small	Per- manent	Port- able
house							
shack							
shed							
barn							
tent							
mansion							



The words used should be a semantically close-knit group. These words are used as labels for the rows in the matrix. The vertical columns contain phrases describing components of meaning shared by some of the words or that distinguish a word from others. Recording whether or not each feature relates to the word is done at the intersections. The marks in the cells can be arrived at through class discussion.

Marzano and Marzano (1988) include in their publication clusters of related words used in elementary school. This resource could be useful when developing feature analysis matrices.

To encourage students to select words and to use personal experiences and general knowledge the following instructional steps can be used (Haggard, 1986)

**Steps for implementing the vocabulary self-collection strategy for general, basal reading, and content area vocabulary instruction.**

General Vocabulary Instruction	Basal Reading Instruction	Content Area Reading Instruction
Students bring to class one word they believe the class should learn. Teacher brings one word.	Students identify one word they believe the group should learn. Teacher identifies one word.	Students and teacher narrow list to predetermined number for final class list.
Students write words on chalkboard and give definitions as best they can from context.	Teacher writes word on chalkboard as students give definitions from context.	Student teams identify a word or term important for learning content information. Teacher identifies one word/term.
	Class members add any information they can to each definition.	Teacher writes words on chalkboard as teams give definitions from context.
	Teacher and students consult references for definitions that are incomplete or unclear. Final definitions are derived.	Students record class list with agreed-upon definitions in vocabulary journals.
		Students record any additional words on personal vocabulary lists.
		Class list words are used in followup study activities.
Words are tested according to instructional goals.	Words become part of extension activities or end-of-unit tests.	Words/terms are tested as they apply to content information.

Carr (1985) suggests using the following ten steps in a vocabulary overview guide as a model for students to use on their own to learn word meanings.

*"It is crucial for teachers to help students to become independent word learners."*

**VOCABULARY OVERVIEW GUIDE**

*Define the vocabulary through use of context*

1. Survey/look over the material (title, headings) to see what it is about.
2. Skim the material to identify unknown vocabulary words and underline them.
3. Try to figure out the meaning of the word from the context of the sentences around it. Ask someone or use a dictionary to check the meaning.

4. Write the definition in the text (use pencil) or on paper so that it will be available when you read the text.
5. Read the passage with the defined vocabulary to ensure comprehension.

*Complete a Vocabulary Overview Guide*

6. Fill in your Vocabulary Overview Guide. Write:
  - a) the title of the passage
  - b) the category titles—decide on the categories you need by asking yourself the topics the vocabulary described or discussed
  - c) the vocabulary word
  - d) the definition underneath the vocabulary word (you can use synonyms here—make sure you leave room to add a few more synonyms as your vocabulary increases)

- e) a clue to help you connect the meaning to something you know or have experienced

**Study the vocabulary**

7. Read the title and categories to activate background knowledge and recall words associated with each aspect of the story.
8. When you study the word in each category, cover the clue and word meaning—uncover the clue if necessary. If the clue doesn't jog your memory, then uncover the meaning.
9. Review your words frequently (each day) until you know them well. Review them once a week or periodically as you learn more words.
10. Add synonyms to old vocabulary words as you learn them—in this way you will connect the old with the new words and that will help you remember them.

Another good way to teach vocabulary is as a basis for predicting the major components of a narrative selection. Select a group of words from a story and discuss the words with the class. When you are sure the students understand the words, ask them to try to predict what the story may be about. Develop the questions in specific areas to provide background information for reading the story.

**Characterization:** Which words probably tell you about the main character?

**Setting:** Which words tell where he or she lives?

**Mood or feeling:** Do any words tell you about the mood of the story?

**Reality / Fantasy:** Do you think the story will be a fantasy or a realistic story? Use the words to support your answer.

**Events / outcomes:** Which words give clues about the events in the story?

Children should have many opportunities to read. This in itself will build understanding of word meanings. However, some vocabulary must be taught to foster understanding of selections. In-depth teaching of words containing unfamiliar concepts is necessary for this understanding to occur. Word knowledge can not be left to incidental learning, to locating and writing definitions or to using only the context. Teachers should carefully select words needing intense instruction and then use a variety of strategies involving student participation. Equally important is providing opportunities for students to learn the skills they need for obtaining word meanings on their own.



Anderson, Richard C., and Peter Freebody. "Vocabulary Knowledge." Comprehension and Teaching: Research Review, In John T. Guthrie (ed.), Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1981.

Beck, Isabel. "Developing Comprehension: The Impact of the Directed Reading Lesson." In Richard C. Anderson and others (eds). Learning to Read in American Schools. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 1984.

Beck, Isabel. "The Effects of Long-Term Vocabulary Instruction on Lexical Access and Reading Comprehension." Journal of Educational Psychology, 74.4 (1982): 506-521.

Beck, Isabel and M. McKeown. "Learning Words Well: A Program to Enhance Vocabulary and Comprehension." The Reading Teacher, 36.1 (Mar. 1983): 622-625.

Bragstad, Bernice Jensen and others. *Technical Vocabulary: Absorbing Specialized Meaning.* A Guidebook for Teaching Study Skills and Motivation. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987.

Carr, Eileen M. *The Vocabulary Overview Guide: A Metacognitive Strategy to Improve Vocabulary Comprehension and Retention.* Journal of Reading. (May 1985): 684-689.

Center for the Study of Reading Adoption Guidelines Project, A Guide to Selecting Basal Reading Programs: Vocabulary Instruction. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. 1986.

Cooper, J. David. Improving Reading Comprehension. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.

This chapter presents goals for vocabulary instruction, a model for vocabulary development, ways to create a vocabulary atmosphere, strategies for preteaching vocabulary and ways to help students become independent.

Johnson, Dale D. (guest editor). Journal of Reading: Special Issue on Vocabulary. 29.7 (Apr. 1986).

This special issue contains articles by scholars in the field of vocabulary. The articles range from discussions of theoretical concerns to specific instructional strategies. Some citations included in this paper are:

Carr, Eileen and Karen W. Wixson. *Guidelines for Evaluating Vocabulary Instruction.*

Graves, Michael F. and Maureen C. Prenn. *Costs and Benefits of Various Methods of Teaching Vocabulary.*

Haggard, Martha Rapp. *The Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy: Using Student Interest and World Knowledge to Enhance Vocabulary Growth.*

Nelson-Herber, Joan. *Expanding and Refining Vocabulary in Content Areas.*

Stahl, Steven A. *Three Principals of Effective Vocabulary Instruction.*

Marzano, Robert J. and Jana S. Marzano. A Cluster Approach to Elementary Vocabulary Instruction. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1988.

These authors present a rationale for teaching vocabulary in categories of semantically-related words and then they provide 7,230 elementary school words organized into clusters.

McKeown, Margaret G. and others. *Some Effects of the Nature and Frequency of Vocabulary Instruction on the Knowledge and Use of the Words.* Reading Research Quarterly, 20.5 (Fall, 1985) 522-535.

McNeil, John D. Reading Comprehension: New Directions for Classroom Practice. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1987.

One section of the book discusses the teaching of vocabulary as an interactive process and it describes different ways to present words as a network of ideas.

Mezynski, Karen. *Issues Concerning the Acquisition of Knowledge: Effects of Vocabulary Training on Reading Comprehension.* Review of Educational Research, 53.2 (Summer, 1983): 253-276.

Moore, David W. *Vocabulary.* Research Within Reach Secondary School Reading. Donna E. Alvermann and others (eds). Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1987.

This chapter provides information for secondary teachers about the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension and what research shows is the best way to teach vocabulary.

Nagy, William E. Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1988.

Research findings are used as the basis for recommending and describing useful and effective approaches to vocabulary instruction.



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The review of research and initial draft of this paper was done by Erma Inscore, reading coordinator, Douglas County School District, Roseburg. The paper was revised to reflect comments from Oregon educators and published by the Oregon Department of Education.

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**JUNE 1989**

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