

KNOWING AND TEACHING “THE LANGUAGE”

By

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Academic disciplines have their own language—a set of specialized words and phrases that have very specific meanings within the field. For example, in English language arts students encounter words such as metaphors, genre and critique. In mathematics, however, students learn about integers, angles, and exponents. Academic vocabulary is generally defined as vocabulary critical to understanding the concepts of the content taught in schools; word knowledge that makes it possible for students to engage with, produce, and talk about texts that are valued in school (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

Low academic language skills have been linked to low academic performance and this lack of language skill is not limited to English language learners. Many students with a strong social vocabulary may have a weak academic vocabulary and some students have a strong academic vocabulary in one content area but not in all. Think about the student who seems “to get” science but has great difficulty in language arts or the student who aces math but is lost in social studies.

Academic vocabulary typically differs than everyday spoken English vocabulary as it encompasses words with more Latin and Greek roots. Because the language used in content area courses is different in structure from the everyday spoken English of social interactions, many students experience difficulty with comprehension of the material. One of the main challenges for students’ comprehension of texts and lectures is limited academic vocabulary knowledge. So as educators what should we do?

According to Marzano (2005) the strongest action a teacher can take to ensure that students have the academic background knowledge to understand the content they will encounter is providing them with direct instruction in academic vocabulary. When students understand these terms, it is easier for them to understand the information they will read and hear in class thus improving their comprehension (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Many states are recognizing that academic vocabulary should be a state-wide priority. Ensuing that all students are exposed to specific academic terms and phrases across the grade levels provides a strong, common foundation for all students and thus leads to more in-depth understanding of content. For example, in [Tennessee](#), the department of education has developed extensive materials related to academic vocabulary with the goal to provide teachers a list of common terms or phrases aimed at systematically improving vocabulary development of all Tennessee students. Similar initiatives are underway in Hawaii, California, Delaware, Illinois and Florida.

While the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction presently does not have an initiative focused on academic vocabulary underway, schools can and should begin to forge ahead. In *Word Wise Content Rich: Five Essential Steps to teaching Academic Vocabulary* (2008), Fisher and Frey devote an entire chapter to making academic vocabulary a priority

and creating a school wide focus on learning words that will improve students' understanding and Marzano and Pickering (2005) developed an complete teachers manual and study program for exploring academic vocabulary. These are excellent resources for you to begin your journey.

Improving students' academic vocabulary must become a priority. Consider this a challenge-how will you make begin to know and teach "the Language" so that students of all abilities will have a strong foundation in vocabulary that will transcend beyond the classroom walls?

RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Websites

www.readwritethink.org

<http://wordgeneration.org/index.html>

www.m-w.com

www.infovisual.info

www.rhymezone.com

www.spanishdict.com

www.wordreference.com

www.bartleby.com/thesauri

Professional Reading

Beck, I. McKeown, M.G & Kucan, L. (2002) Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction.

Blachowicz, C & Fisher, P (2002). Teaching Vocabulary in All Classrooms.

Fisher & Frey (2008). Word Wise and Content Rich: Five essential steps to teaching academic vocabulary.

Graves, M. (2006). The Vocabulary Book: Learning and Instruction.

Marzano (2004). Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement

Marzano, R. and Pickering, D. (2005). Building academic vocabulary: Teacher's manual.

References

- Bronzo, W.G., & Simpson M.L. (2007). Content literacy for today's adolescents: Honoring diversity and building competence (5th ed.). Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Marzano, R. and Pickering, D. (2005). Building academic vocabulary: Teacher's manual. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Stahl, S., & Fairbanks, M. (1986). The effects of vocabulary instruction: A model-based meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 56(1), 72-110.