Learn Strategies, Not Words

Research-Based Strategies
for Word Acquisition

Understanding the Context

Imagine having to cook a dish without all of the ingredients. Imagine trying to drive your car with flat tires. Imagine exiting your house only to discover that you have left your key inside. Now, imagine a student trying to figure out what a word means without adequate strategies. Increasing students' academic vocabulary is about giving them opportunities to learn more words by increasing their exposure to unfamiliar words and providing them with the strategic tools to figure out their meanings.

> Academic vocabulary includes words that are used in the course of assigning, teaching, and discussing within the context of classes, such as brainstorm, compare, and illustrate, and words that are specific to the content areas, such as poetry, circumference, matter, dictate, narrator, planet, fossil, ancient, experiment, and triangle (Hollie 2012, 96).

Exposure to unfamiliar words comes best through wide reading (Graves 2006). Additionally, students need a repertoire of strategic tools to understand new words, such as how to use context clues, how to analyze root words, and how to make schematic connections with synonyms. Solely using traditional vocabulary instruction is like telling your students to cook a meal without all of the ingredients. Memorizing words as a primary means of instruction is ineffective (Kame'enui, Dixon, and Carnine 1987; Cooper 2000; Ford-Connors and Paratore 2014).

By focusing on research-proven strategies, CLR allows "all of the ingredients" to create effective vocabulary instruction for meaningful word-acquisition strategies—not memorization. In CLR, the use of the strategies, particularly synonym development, lend themselves to validation and affirmation. Many students' home language words will not only be conceptually based but they will also be synonyms of the academic Tier Two words that they need for school success. When a student makes a connection between his or her home language and the target vocabulary, not only does this validate and affirm the child's home language but it also builds and bridges to Standard English and academic language. Imagine a student moving from his or her word (or phrase) "talks a lot" to talkative to loquacious. This learning can be achieved through use of the Personal Thesaurus, a special CLR tool for building vocabulary.

The focus on word-acquisition strategies for Tier Two words is conducive to validating and affirming. However, building and bridging for Tier Three words requires a different strategy. Since Tier Three words are largely content specific and low in frequency, there is less of an expectation that students would own these words in the same way as

> The Personal Thesaurus (PT) is a tool to help students develop knowledge of synonyms and antonyms (Hollie 2012, 105). The process for this tool is further described in Chapter 7.

the Tier Two words. Therefore, these words would be taught through a more traditional approach or squarely from the build and bridge aspect. Meaning, the vocabulary instruction would be more focused around the technical meanings of the words as compared to the conceptual understandings with the Tier Two words. Both tiers, though, emphasize the students making personal connections. The Personal Dictionary, another special CLR tool, is used to help students acquire Tier Three words.

In responsive vocabulary teaching, the focus for strategy instruction will be with Tier Two words. That is not to say that Tier Three words are not taught, but they will be done differently. This distinction in vocabulary instruction is an important aspect of national standards for English language arts and literacy, as shown in Figure 6.1.

> The Personal Dictionary (PD) is based on the Frayer model (Frayer, Frederick, and Klausmeier 1969). In this model a technical term and its definition are supplied. The student has to create an illustration and personal connection (Hollie 2012, 107). The process for this tool is further described in Chapter 7.

Figure 6.1 Sample English Language Arts Standards for Grade 4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

▶ Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

▶ Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., *telegraph*, *photograph*, *autograph*).

▶ Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

▶ Explain the meaning of simple similes and metaphors (e.g., *pretty as a picture*) in context.

▶ Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs.

▶ Demonstrate understanding of words by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) and to words with similar but not identical meanings (synonyms).

▶ Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general and academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being (e.g., *wildlife*, *conservation*, and *endangered* when discussing animal preservation).

(NGA and CCSSO 2010a, CCSS.ELA.Literacy.L.4.4–4.6)

Considering the Research

Current research supports teaching students how to use morphology and context clues to determine word meaning of academic vocabulary words. The following studies represent a sample of relevant research supporting the instruction of vocabulary strategies in a culturally responsive classroom.

▶ Children are competent in recognizing and using inflections well before entering school (Clark 1993).

▶ Children acquire about 600 root word meanings per year from infancy to the end of elementary school (Biemiller and Slonim 2001).

▶ Middle school students learn between 1,500 and 8,000 words from context (Nagy, Anderson, and Herman 1987).

▶ Students at higher grade levels and higher reading ability are better able to use context clues (Swanborn and Glopper 1999).

▶ Context learning of word meaning increases substantially with additional occurrences of the word (Graves 2006).

▶ Fifth-grade strong word learners show more understanding of morphological generalization than the eighth-grade average word learners (Nagy, Diakidoy, and Anderson 1993).

▶ Students' understanding of morphology is a better predictor of reading comprehension than their vocabulary level (Kieffer and Lesaux 2007).

▶ Limited vocabulary knowledge is a potential source of reading comprehension difficulties, especially among older struggling readers, whether language minority learners or native English speakers (Biancarosa and Snow 2006; Chall and Jacobs 2003; Fillmore 1982; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] 2000; RAND Reading Study Group 2002; Stahl and Nagy 2006; Valdés 2000).

Pre-Reading Assessment

Before reading this chapter, reflect upon how you teach word-acquisition strategies——use of context clues, analysis of word parts, and synonym development—to your students. As you rate yourself, think about the effectiveness and efficiency of your word-acquisition strategy instruction. If you are not teaching any word-acquisition strategies, think about the ways that you can start. The survey in Figure 6.2 invites you to rate yourself and begin the reflective process about strategies for learning words.

Figure 6.2 Learning Strategies, Not Words Survey: Before Infusing the CLR Principles

	0 Never Emerging	1 Rarely Splashing	2 Sometimes Floating	3 Mostly Kicking	4 Always Free Styling
My students participate in some form of free voluntary reading.					
I teach the use of context clues at least once every two weeks.					
I expose my students to word parts for analysis as applicable.					
I explicitly teach synonyms with Tier Two words.					
I am able to build and bridge my students' use of slang to academic vocabulary when appropriate.					
I provide six exposures to vocabulary words.					

Beginning the Reflective Process

Learning happens when we reflect upon what we have experienced. Critical learning *generates*, *deepens*, and *documents* learning (Ash, Clayton, and Moses 2009a, 2009b). So, are you ready to implement strategies for word acquisition?

Use the following checklist to gauge your readiness and ability to effectively implement word-acquisition strategies into your teaching. Each item represents an important aspect of understanding and using word-acquisition strategies in a culturally responsive classroom. After completing the checklist, read the detailed descriptions of each item and reflect on how you plan to implement or increase your use of word-acquisition strategies in the classroom.

The Use of Word-Acquisition Strategies Reflection Checklist

❏ Yes ❏ No **Item 1:** Do I know how to teach the word-aquisition strategies?

❏ Yes ❏ No **Item 2:** Do I see the necessary connection between Tier Two words and validation and affirmation?

❏ Yes ❏ No **Item 3:** Do I recognize that my students' use of slang provides an instructional opportunity for building and bridging to academic language?

❏ Yes ❏ No **Item 4:** Do I provide plenty of practice with new vocabulary?

Item 1: Do I know how to teach the word-acquisition strategies?

The majority of the teachers I work with do not have a systematic way of teaching vocabulary. Thus, the notion of how teaching research-identified strategies, such as the use of context clues, can, depending on the teacher, be either off-putting or a welcomed opportunity. A notable difference exists between teaching words individually or in isolation and teaching students how to use word-acquisition strategies. Fortunately, myriad resources are available for teaching word-acquisition strategies, such as the use of context clues, analysis of root words, and synonym development. The purpose here is to show you how to connect those strategies to culturally responsive teaching. Nonetheless, here are some tips for working with the strategies (Graves 2006).

1 The teacher provides an explicit description of the word-acquisition strategy and when and how it should be used.

2 The teacher and student (or both individually) model the use of the strategy in action.

3 The teacher provides opportunities for students to collaboratively use the strategy in action.

4 The teacher provides guided practice using the strategy with gradual release of responsibility to students.

5 Students use the strategy independently.

Taken together, these tips follow the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson and Gallagher 1983) where the teacher reduces the amount of guidance and support offered, enabling students to achieve independence.

> **I recommend these sources to further your vocabulary teaching development:**
>
> - *Vocabulary Handbook* by Linda Diamond and Linda Gutlohn (2007)
>
> - *Inside Words: Tools for Teaching Academic Vocabulary, Grades 4–12* by Janet Allen (2007)
>
> - Edutopia, an online educational magazine with many articles, resources and blogs useful for teaching vocabulary (http://www.edutopia.org/)
>
> - "Strategies for Vocabulary Development," a concise, insightful article by Dr. Kate Kinsella, Dr. Colleen Shea Stump, and Dr. Kevin Feldman and available via Pearson Prentice Hall's eTeach website at http://www.phschool.com/eteach/language_arts/2002_03/essay.html
>
> - *Getting to the Roots of Content-Area Vocabulary* by Timothy Rasinski, Nancy Padak, Rick Newton, and Evangeline Newton (2014)

Four exercises at the end of the chapter provide practice with the word-acquisition strategies.

> **Reflective Thought:** Recall that CLR inherently challenges your pedagogy. In this specific case, the challenge is to make your vocabulary teaching stronger, which in one context is unrelated to CLR. Embrace these three key vocabulary strategies in this larger context, if for no other reason than you will be a better teacher for it. In what ways do the CLR methods challenge your vocabulary teaching? What kinds of word-acquisition strategies do you routinely use with your students? Which one(s) would you like to incorporate?

Thought-Provokers: A Mindset for Moving Forward

1. I started with a one word-acquisition strategy and then have added others as I become more confident. I allow the selected words to determine the appropriate strategy and when it is appropriate to teach it.

2. I make it a point to really praise students when they make those schematic connections between their home language and the academic language of school.

Thought-Blockers: A Mindset for Staying Stagnant

1. I realize I need to increase my knowledge around vocabulary instruction but I do not have time to research that.

2. I allow material coverage in the content areas to justify not giving students opportunities for using word-acquisition strategies.

Item 2: Do I see the necessary connection between Tier Two words and validation and affirmation?

Your responsive vocabulary teaching boils down to establishing the connection between Tier Two word meanings and what the students know and understand conceptually about those words. Teaching students how to acquire vocabulary or word-acquisition strategies will have a long-lasting effect that will influence their academic learning in writing, reading, and speaking. This is the crux of validating and affirming the students and the home language they bring to school. When students make connections between the Tier Two words, or academic words, and their home vocabulary, you will see the proverbial light bulb go on. As connections between school words and home language are made, students feel validated and affirmed seeing something school-related through their home lens.

Validation and affirmation establish the foundation to build and bridge students to the vocabulary of school. The ultimate goal of responsive vocabulary instruction is learning strategies, not words. This is a win-win situation for students. The specificity of the validation and affirmation is that when students make a schematic connection between the concept of the

Tier Two words and the words they own, it positively legitimizes what they know from home. Figure 6.3 provides examples of students making validating and affirming connections between home language and Tier Two words.

Figure 6.3 Validating and Affirming Connections Between Words

Home Language Words	Tier Two (Academic) Words
show off	pretentious
brief	succinct
important	vital
fall	collapse

Students will make schematic connections between the words they already know and the target words or academic words. By doing so, students are validated and affirmed while increasing their academic vocabulary. Michael Graves (2006) calls this *polysemy*. Polysemy refers to the fact that words have multiple meanings. He notes, "It is worth recognizing that the multiple meanings of words range from cases in which the meanings are completely unrelated to cases in which the differences are so subtle that it is difficult to decide whether or not they are indeed different meanings" (135).

Reflective Thought: There is only one place to go and that is improving your vocabulary instruction with CLR. Looking through a responsive lens will give your students a greater opportunity to increase their academic vocabularies.

Thought-Provokers: A Mindset for Moving Forward

1 I understand that focusing on Tier Two words or words that students already have conceptual understandings of is automatically validating and affirming.

2 I know that I am not abandoning Tier Three words. I am just going to deal with them differently.

Thought-Blockers: A Mindset for Staying Stagnant

1 I believe that students are blank slates or that their home vocabularies lack value, which limits their connection to academic learning.

2 I see Tier Three words as yielding the most mileage for students' learning.

Item 3: Do I recognize that my students' use of slang provides an instructional opportunity for building and bridging to academic language?

A powerful aspect of the validation and affirmation concept is when you connect with your students' language at times or places they least expect. The use of slang terms would be one of these times. While the use of profanity and racially charged words provide additional opportunities for academic vocabulary expansion, I will just focus on slang in this notebook. First of all, the use of slang has to be looked at through a cultural lens, as opposed to a deficit lens.

The use of slang is a vocabulary rite of passage for many teenagers regardless of their racial, ethnic, or economic background. This language separates young people from older ones. Indeed, youth culture relates more to the use of slang than racial or ethnic identities (Hollie 2012; Bucholtz 2000; Reyes 2005). Through a cultural lens, slang can then be seen as:

▶ linguistic capital—shows capacity to learn vocabulary

▶ language of the youth—is temporal, dynamic, and peer-driven

▶ leisure speak—is fun, colorful, descriptive, and rich

How, then, do you build and bridge the use of slang at school? Treat the slang terms as chances for synonym development. In no way is this a suggestion that slang is appropriate vocabulary for school or academic writing or speaking. The objective is to bridge the slang terms and their conceptual meanings to the academic words through a process I call *academization*. Academization means you learn students' slang terms and their conceptual meanings. Next, you supply the conceptual academic terms that match the slang words. Last, you validate and affirm the slang word through the use of the personal thesaurus. Figure 6.4 shows an example of how an academization process may look.

Figure 6.4 Example of the Academization Process

Slang Term	Meaning	Academic Term
bite	to copy	plagiarize
Gucci	great quality	superior
chop it up	discuss	parlay
slammin'	well done	superb

The key is to be open to learning the slang terms students are currently using. Given how rapidly words fall out of favor and new words appear to take their place, staying current lends credibility and authenticity. Also, doing so leads to the teacher empowerment aspect of CLR. Anything that connects teachers to students culturally and linguistically is empowering and significant.

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Reflective Thought: Are you aware of all the slang terms your students use in their daily interpersonal communications, such as on the playground and with their peers? How do you learn about the new slang terminology that enters your students' vernacular?

Thought-Provokers: A Mindset for Moving Forward

1 I am open to surveying my students to compare slang terms from "my day" with slang terms from today.

Think of general categories, like money, food, or friends.

2 When in doubt about examples, I do some research.

There are several popular websites for looking up the most recent slang terminology. One excellent source is Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com), but beware that the site contains sexually explicit and profane language. The Online Slang Dictionary (http://onlineslangdictionary.com/) offers a similar service, but with a slightly more delicate touch, applying asterisks in place of key letters in vulgar words on main pages and documenting the level of vulgarity associated with each term. The words do remain unaltered on their actual definition pages, however, so this site may still not be entirely work-safe.

Thought-Blockers: A Mindset for Staying Stagnant

1 I view the use of slang as inappropriate at school.

2 I feel like I am too old to learn or go to where the students are culturally and linguistically.

Item 4: Do I provide plenty of practice with new vocabulary?

Practicing with new words through review activities and games is very important. Robert J. Marzano and Lindsay Carleton (2010) state, "Engaging your students with activities that are review and fun games will add to their knowledge" (38). Simply going over the words once or twice will not cut it. Multiple exposures to the words make a significant difference in terms of memorizing the words and actually owning them (Nagy and Scott 2000). Providing varied and prolific reading opportunities, contextualization of words, knowledge of word parts, and synonyms all expose students to new vocabulary.

Additionally, I recommend reading the following resources for building vocabulary:

- *Vocabulary for the Common Core* by Robert J. Marzano and Julia A. Simms

- *Vocabulary Games for the Classroom* by Robert J. Marzano and Lindsay Carleton

- *Building Academic Vocabulary: Student Notebook* by Robert J. Marzano and Debra J. Pickering

- *Building Academic Vocabulary: Teacher's Manual* by Robert J. Marzano and Debra J. Pickering

- *Teaching the Critical Vocabulary of the Common Core: 55 Words that Make or Break Student Understanding* by Marilee Sprenger

- *Language for Learning: Building Content Area and Academic Vocabulary* by Diane Lapp, Barbara Moss, and James Flood

- *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction, 2nd Edition* by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan

- *Vocabulary Ladders: Understanding Word Nuances* by Timothy Rasinski and Melissa Cheesman Smith

Reflective Thought: Vocabulary teaching does not stop after six exposures. Take the time to plan accordingly with practice exercises and games. You do not need tons, just some in your toolbox to have variety.

Thought-Provokers: A Mindset for Moving Forward

1 I acknowledge that practice, practice, and more practice is part of any effective learning and eventual academic success.

2 I am careful not to overwhelm my students.

Too much practice without enough substance can be detrimental. Sometimes the students need authentic opportunities to use the words they are beginning to own. Having students write op-eds to the local newspaper or a fan letter to their favorite movie star or music artist are examples of those opportunities.

Thought-Blockers: A Mindset for Staying Stagnant

1 I am deterred from focusing on vocabulary strategies by the amount of content I must cover. I question whether increased vocabulary will give me leverage.

2 Teaching vocabulary this way may challenge my pedagogy and therefore seems too difficult for me.

Understanding Assessment

Assessment is the final piece, so be sure to test, quiz, or use cloze procedures to see what students know. Students' ability to use the words in their academic writing and speaking is the ultimate test. The following are some guidelines for effective assessment:

▶ Assessments assess what students have gathered meaning from, connected to, and learned.

▶ Assessments should be administered to measure background knowledge of a new concept based on multiple exposures.

▶ Vocabulary assessments are opportunities to develop Standard English skills for taking standardized tests.

▶ Multiple-choice tests are appropriate for practice in using context clues or word parts to determine meaning.

▶ Multiple-choice assessments do not adequately assess a student's deeper level of word knowledge.

▶ Providing students with choices helps them discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate usages.

Concluding Thoughts

Focusing on word-acquisition strategies is the heavy lifting of the responsive vocabulary approach. To the extent that you are able to incorporate word-acquisition strategies into your regular teaching, the more likely you are to validate, affirm, build, and bridge your students' language development. While I have not touched on Tier Three words in this chapter, I will in the next chapter when I give the how-to of the personal thesaurus and personal dictionary.