

# **The Vocabulary Book**

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Learning and Instruction

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SECOND EDITION

Michael F. Graves



# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The Importance of Vocabulary	2
Why a New Edition?	3
Three Critical Facts About Vocabulary	4
The Four-Part Program Described in This Book	5
An Overview of This Book	9
<b>2. Words and Word Learning</b>	<b>11</b>
The Vocabulary-Learning Task Students Face	11
Vocabulary Instruction	16
Concluding Remarks	41
<b>3. Selecting Vocabulary to Teach</b>	<b>43</b>
Selecting Vocabulary to Teach from the Texts Students Are Reading	43
Some Word Lists to Consider	56
Assessing Students' Word Knowledge	62
Concluding Remarks	68
<b>4. Providing Rich and Varied Language Experiences</b>	<b>69</b>
Promoting Incidental Word Learning	70
Directly Building Primary-Grade Children's Oral Vocabularies	74
Word-Consciousness Activities for the Primary Grades	84
Concluding Remarks	86

<b>5. Teaching Individual Words</b>	<b>89</b>
Preliminaries to Teaching Individual Words	90
Methods of Teaching Individual Words	96
Selecting Among the Methods and Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension	112
Repetition and Review	113
Concluding Remarks	116
<b>6. Teaching Word-Learning Strategies</b>	<b>117</b>
A Powerful Model for Teaching Strategies	117
Preliminaries to Instruction on Specific Word-Learning Strategies	119
Using Word Parts	119
Using Context Clues	131
Using the Dictionary	136
Recognizing and Dealing with Multiword Units	139
Developing a Strategy for Dealing with Unknown Words	139
Adopting a Personal Approach to Building Vocabulary	140
When Should the Strategies Be Taught?	141
Concluding Remarks	142
<b>7. Promoting Word Consciousness</b>	<b>143</b>
Modeling, Recognizing, and Encouraging Adept Diction	145
Promoting Wordplay	147
Providing Rich and Expressive Instruction	151
Involving Students in Original Investigations	154
Teaching Students About Words	157
An Activity That Both Fosters Word Consciousness and Teaches Individual Words	162
Concluding Remarks	164
<b>8. Special Considerations for English Learners</b>	<b>165</b>
Some General Principles of Effective Instruction	166

Effective Instruction for English Learners	167
Suggestions for Modifying Each of the Four Parts of the Program	172
Supporting Students' Reading with Scaffolded Reading Experiences	178
Concluding Remarks	186
<b>Final Words</b>	<b>187</b>
The Importance of a Multifaceted Approach to Vocabulary Instruction	187
Apportioning Time to Each of the Four Parts of the Program	188
Providing Long-Term Instruction	189
Providing Differentiated Instruction	189
Teaching for Transfer	190
The Place of Vocabulary in a Comprehensive Literacy Program	192
<b>Literature Cited</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>230</b>

## Introduction

Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

—Children’s Nursery Rhyme

It is certainly true that sticks and stones will break your bones, but it is patently untrue that words will never hurt you. We have all experienced hurtful words, perhaps very hurtful words. Words can be incredibly powerful. Of course, their effect need not be a negative one. Words can also exert a very powerful positive influence, as do the words Portia speaks in her “Quality of Mercy” speech, those of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his “Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. in his “I Have a Dream” speech, and Hillary Rodham Clinton in her “Women’s Rights are Human Rights” speech.

But it is not only words that can have a powerful effect. The absence of words can also have a very powerful effect. As scholars such as Becker (1977); White, Graves, and Slater (1990); Hart and Risley (1995); Rodriguez and Tamis-LeMonda (2011); and Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder (2013) have shown, a number of students—including many English learners (ELs) and children growing up in poverty—enter school with debilitating small vocabularies that severely hamper their ability to learn to read and to succeed in school.

The trajectory of vocabulary development for English-speaking children raised in language-rich, English-speaking environments is reasonably well established, although there is a good deal of variation in the timing of that development. The National Institutes of Health (2014) suggest the following developmental milestones: From birth to 3 months, children react to loud sounds and coo and make pleasure sounds. From 4–6 months, they respond to changes in their parents’ tone of voice, babble in a speech-like way, and use many different sounds. From 7 months to a year, they listen when spoken to, understand common terms such as *milk* and *juice*, and by the end of the year have learned a few words, perhaps *dada* and *mama*. From 1 to 3 years, children can follow simple commands, acquire new words on a regular basis, and use two- and three-word phrases to talk about a number of things. From 4 to 5 years,

they use sentences with four or more words, hear and understand most of what is said at home or in school, and communicate easily with adults and other children.

While this general sequence of vocabulary development is widely agreed on, estimates of the size of children's vocabularies at the time they enter school vary markedly, even if we consider only the vocabularies of children raised in supportive English-speaking homes. My best estimate, however, based on the work of Anderson and Nagy (1992); Anglin (1993); Miller and Wakefield (1993); Nagy and Anderson (1984); Nagy and Herman (1987); Snow and Kim (2007); Stahl and Nagy (2006); and White et al. (1990) is that linguistically advantaged children enter school with oral vocabularies of 5,000–10,000 words. The vocabularies of less linguistically advantaged children—English learners and children growing up in poverty—are considerably smaller than this, with some English learners who have just arrived in the United States beginning school with only a handful of English words and some children who grew up in English-speaking but linguistically impoverished environments having vocabularies perhaps half the size of their more advantaged classmates (Becker, 1977; Fernald et al., 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; White et al., 1990).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY

The size of students' vocabularies as they enter and progress through school matters because vocabulary is tremendously important in learning to read, in succeeding in all school subjects, and in achieving in the world beyond school. The findings of over 100 years of vocabulary research include the following:

- Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best indicators of verbal ability (Sternberg, 1987; Terman, 1916).
- Vocabulary knowledge contributes to young children's phonological awareness, which in turn contributes to their word recognition (Goswami, 2001; Nagy, 2005).
- Vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten and 1st grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Scarborough, 1998).
- Vocabulary difficulty strongly influences the readability of text (Chall & Dale, 1995; Fitzgerald, Ellmore, Relyea-Kim, Hiebert, & Stenner, in press.).
- Teaching vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982) and English learners (Carlo et al., 2004).

- Growing up in poverty can seriously restrict the vocabulary children learn before beginning school and make attaining an adequate vocabulary a challenging task (Fernald et al., 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995).
- Disadvantaged students are likely to have substantially smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged classmates (Templin, 1957; White et al., 1990).
- Learning English vocabulary is one of the most crucial tasks for English learners (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Nation, 2014b).
- Lack of vocabulary can be a crucial factor underlying the school failure of disadvantaged students (Becker, 1977; Bergland, 2014).

Moreover, vocabulary has consistently been recognized as important across time and across various educational trends. It was, for example, central to the work of Edward Thorndike (Clifford, 1978; Thorndike, 1921, 1930; Thorndike & Lorge, 1944); it was one of the five “pillars” of reading identified by the National Reading Panel (2000) and underlying the Reading First program, and it is one of six “shifts” underlying the Common Core (Coleman, 2011). Fortunately, since vocabulary is so important, we know a great deal about vocabulary development and about how to teach vocabulary. Over 100 years of vocabulary research led to the above findings, as well as to a wealth of others. I review the research on vocabulary learning and vocabulary instruction in some detail in Chapter 2. In the remainder of this chapter, I briefly describe my reasons for revising *The Vocabulary Book* at this time, discuss three critical factors to keep in mind as you consider vocabulary instruction, introduce the four-part vocabulary program described in this book, and give an overview of the remaining chapters and an afterword.

### WHY A NEW EDITION?

It has now been 10 years since the first edition of *The Vocabulary Book*, and a new edition is definitely called for. Here are the major factors motivating me as I write:

- Theory and research on vocabulary learning and vocabulary instruction have advanced markedly, although as I have recently noted (Graves, 2015a), we still have much to learn.
- A number of new instructional practices have been developed. Some of these are based on recent research and theory, while others are the result of teachers doing what they have always done—finding new and more powerful ways to increase student learning.

- The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010) have both highlighted the importance of vocabulary and made building strong vocabularies an absolute necessity for today's students. This is particularly due to the emphasis the Common Core puts on reading complex text, which of course often contains complex vocabulary, and the insistence in the Common Core that *all* students read these complex texts.
- The number of English learners in school and information about succeeding with ELs has markedly increased, resulting in this edition in a chapter specifically on instruction for ELs.
- I have become increasingly aware of both the importance and the challenges of selecting from the huge number of words teachers might teach the relatively small number of words that they have time to teach. This awareness led to another new chapter in this edition, one on selecting vocabulary to teach.
- Using the first edition of *The Vocabulary Book* in classes and in-service sessions and feedback from teachers and teacher educators who have used the book has produced a number of ideas for improving the book, and I have incorporated many of these ideas into this edition.

### THREE CRITICAL FACTS ABOUT VOCABULARY

At this point, I want to directly state two critical facts about vocabulary and restate another crucial fact, facts to keep firmly in mind as you read this book and plan vocabulary instruction.

First, the vocabulary-learning task is enormous! Estimates of vocabulary size vary greatly, but a reasonable estimate based on a substantial body of recent and rigorous work (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Anglin, 1993; Miller & Wakefield, 1993; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy & Herman, 1987; Snow & Kim, 2007; Stahl & Nagy, 2006; White et al., 1990) is this: The books and other reading materials used by schoolchildren include over 180,000 different words. The average child enters school with a very small reading vocabulary, typically consisting largely of environmental print. Once in school, however, a child's reading vocabulary is likely to soar at a rate of 3,000–4,000 words a year, leading to a reading vocabulary of something like 25,000 words by the time by 8th grade, and a reading vocabulary of something like 50,000 words by the end of high school.

Second, the fact that there are far more words to be learned than we can possibly teach is not an argument that we should not teach any

of them (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2013; Graves, 2014; Neuman & Wright, 2013; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Both instruction on individual words and instruction that promotes children's ability and propensity to learn words on their own are very worthwhile (Baumann & Kame'enui, 2004; Blachowicz, Fisher, et al., 2013; Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Kame'enui & Baumann, 2012; Nagy, 2005; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; National Reading Panel, 2000; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

Third, as I have already noted, there is now a very substantial body of evidence that many English learners and many children raised in poverty enter school with vocabularies much smaller than those of their middle-class and native English-speaking classmates (August et al., 2005; Becker, 1977; Bergland, 2014; Fernald et al., 2013; Hart & Risley, 1995; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011; White et al., 1990). This means that an effective vocabulary program must not only assist linguistically advantaged students who enter school with perhaps 5,000 to 10,000 English words in their oral vocabularies to learn the tens of thousands of words they will need to acquire in their 12 years of schooling but also assist linguistically less advantaged students who enter school with much smaller vocabularies to catch up with their classmates. The four-part program briefly described in the next section of this chapter and elaborated on throughout this book is my very best attempt to provide such a program.

### THE FOUR-PART PROGRAM DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOK

This book presents a comprehensive plan for vocabulary instruction, one broad enough to include instruction for English learners and other children who enter school with small vocabularies, children who possess adequate but not exceptional vocabularies, and children who already have rich and powerful vocabularies and are prepared for the challenge of developing still more sophisticated and useful vocabularies. More specifically, the book describes a four-pronged vocabulary program that I began developing 30 years ago (Graves, 1984, 1985) and have continued to modify and hone since that time (Graves, 1987, 1992, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2008, 2014, 2015a; Graves, August, & Carlo, 2011; Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013; Graves & Fitzgerald, 2006; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). The program has the following four components: frequent, varied, and extensive language experiences; teaching individual words; teaching word-learning strategies; and fostering word consciousness. In the next several pages, I briefly discuss each component and the rationale behind it.

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