

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Providing Explicit Literacy Instruction

June 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Vocabulary Instruction

Highlights

- Direct and explicit vocabulary instruction can help adolescents comprehend content area material and develop strategies for understanding words in context.
- Research suggests that teachers can help students become independent vocabulary learners by modeling explicit strategies, providing repeated exposure to new words in multiple oral and written contexts, and allowing sufficient practice in using new words.
- Content area teachers play a critical role in teaching vocabulary and helping students learn how to analyze word components—prefixes, suffixes, roots—to derive word meanings that occur frequently in their subjects.

Full Transcript

Slide 1: Welcome

Welcome to the overview on Providing Explicit Vocabulary Instruction.

Slide 2: Miguel's new reading challenges

It's only the second week of middle school and Miguel is already experiencing challenges with his new textbooks. He'd never had much trouble with reading assignments back in elementary school, and when he did encounter a new word, it wasn't too hard to figure out what it meant. Now he's coming across a lot of words he's never seen or heard before. Although he doesn't know it, he's not alone. Most middle school students are finding that their new assignments are a lot more difficult.

Fortunately, the teachers in Miguel's school started a schoolwide initiative on explicit vocabulary instruction to help students read and better understand their textbooks.

Slide 3: Escalating difficulty

As students move from the elementary grades to middle and high school, their reading assignments start to include academic terms and phrases they're unlikely to know and even less likely to hear in casual conversation. When they take on specialized areas of study, like algebra and biology, the sheer amount of new vocabulary accelerates. Further, students discover that some new words have multiple meanings and that meanings may vary by subject area and context. For all these reasons, it's vital to help students learn as many vocabulary words as early as possible.

Slide 4: Explicit instruction in all classes

Vocabulary instruction is not only for reading classes, but is applicable to all subject areas. All teachers, regardless of their specialty, can improve student comprehension by providing explicit vocabulary instruction. Explicit instruction includes teaching students both the meaning of selected words and word learning strategies.

First, teachers can help students learn the meaning of specific words and phrases that are frequently encountered in school. This "academic language" is the formal language of classrooms, colleges, and the workplace. Mastering it entails understanding the structure of language and the precise way in which words and phrases are used.

Second, teachers can help students learn how to figure out new words that they encounter when reading on their own. This includes teaching them how to work with word parts to unlock meaning.

Slide 5: Multiple exposure to terms

Many teachers already provide vocabulary definitions to students, but research suggests that in order for students to master a new term or phrase, they need multiple exposures to it and a variety of contexts in which to practice its use. Some suggest that as many as 17 exposures to a new word may be required to fully learn its meaning.

Slide 6: Teach Tier II words

Of course, teachers know they can't teach in advance every new word students will encounter in assigned or independent reading. The question then is, "Which words need to be part of explicit vocabulary instruction?"

As part of a schoolwide initiative, each department can develop a vocabulary framework to identify which words and phrases should be part of explicit instruction. Some researchers suggest sorting words into three categories or tiers.

Tier I words are common words that students hear in everyday conversation. These are easy words that almost all students, with the possible exception of English learners, know.

Tier III words are specific to a particular subject area, are often technical in nature, appear infrequently, and are typically taught by content area teachers.

Tier II words are ideally suited for explicit instruction by both content area and reading teachers because they appear in a variety of texts and part of mature oral and written vocabularies.

Students need exposure to Tier II and Tier III words over an extended time period.

The key is to focus on the vocabulary needed to understand the material, regardless of how frequently any given word occurs.

Slide 7: Model independent strategies

As necessary as it is to explicitly teach specific terms, it is also essential to teach students how to determine the meaning of new words on their own.

By learning how to analyze word components—prefixes, suffixes, and roots—that frequently occur in each area of study, students are able to figure out the meaning of new words that they encounter while reading

on their own. Equally important is showing students how to infer meaning from the context of what they are reading.

Introducing students to glossaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and online reference sites and regularly modeling how to use these resources is helpful.

Slide 8: Regular use

In addition to formal instruction, teachers can help boost student comprehension by using targeted Tier II vocabulary words in their own everyday conversation. Regular modeling improves comprehension of the meaning of terms by placing them in context.

Giving positive feedback when students use new vocabulary during text discussions and in their written work helps to affirm that they are using the terms correctly and encourages them to keep expanding their vocabularies.

Slide 9: Universal benefits

When content teachers engage in explicit vocabulary instruction, students are better equipped to master the material in their courses. A schoolwide commitment to explicit vocabulary teaching brings together faculty from different departments who are able to share strategies and successes and coordinate their expectations of weekly word mastery, strengthening school community and purpose.

Slide 10: Well equipped

At the beginning of the year, Miguel wondered whether he would be able to handle all the reading that middle school required. Now he looks forward to what each new lesson holds. He is surrounded by the words he is expected to learn posted on the walls of his classroom, carries a word journal in his backpack, and has learned how to use several types of online reference tools. His English, math, and science teachers have been working on word analysis, and his social studies teacher uses a variety of graphic organizers to show the relationships among key words.

Miguel now treats the unlocking of word meaning as a welcome challenge—one that he's well equipped to take on.

Slide 11: Learn More

To learn more about providing explicit vocabulary instruction, see the additional materials on the Doing What Works website.