Introducing Academic Vocabulary to Students

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The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) make academic vocabulary a shared responsibility across all academic domains. Although teachers can often identify the difference between high-frequency academic vocabulary (tier two words) and content-specific vocabulary (tier three words), many are unsure about the most effective way to introduce academic vocabulary to their students.

Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards (PDF) explains and provides some examples of tier one, two, and three words. Use this guide to help identify the academic vocabulary students will encounter in the text or lesson you are teaching. Once you identify the tier two words, Archer and Hughes (2011) suggest five steps to explicitly teach these words before students encounter them in a text. This approach will aid students in either building background or activating prior knowledge of vocabulary words.

Here's an example of an academic vocabulary word that I explicitly taught to my students using the five steps: *pronounce, explain, provide examples, elaborate*, and *assess*. In addition, I also prepare a visual with the vocabulary words and definitions to aid my students' understanding of new words.

1. **Pronounce.** This step allows me to demonstrate word attack skills through segmentation and blending. I also require active participation from my students, so they must say the words with me throughout the lesson.

   • *"In this lesson, we will learn a new word called* enhance. *It is a verb or something that nouns do. Please say the word with me everyone:* Enhance. *Good, let's pronounce it by syllables:* En-hance. *Say it again, please:* Enhance. *Excellent."*

2. **Explain.** Explaining the vocabulary word with a student-friendly definition is crucial to students remembering and using the word in different contexts. The website, www.learnersdictionary.com, is a great online tool to use for easy-to-understand definitions.

   • *"The word* enhance *means to increase or improve something. I might say that the chef wanted to use many different herbs to make the flavor of the pizza delicious; she wanted to (students chorally say* enhance*) the flavor."*

3. **Provide Examples.** This next step allows the students to see the word used in different contexts so that they can begin making connections to the word.

   • *"The students decided to add colorful graphics to their science project. They wanted to improve their project or _____ (students say* enhance*) it."*

• *"Rachel decided to go back to school for her master's degree in business. Rachel wanted to _____ (students say* enhance*) her business skills."*

4. **Elaborate.** The students elaborate on selected topics to deepen their understanding of the vocabulary word. This allows students to share ideas with their classmates and use the vocabulary words in context. English language learners or students who struggle may need sentence stems to begin using the words in a new context.

   • *"Imagine you are asked to review a popular video game. Come up with two ways to enhance the video game."*

   • *"Your teacher gave you a survey asking for suggestions or ways to enhance the school lunch menu. Come up with two ways to enhance the menu."*

5. **Assess.** Teachers check students' understanding of the vocabulary word. Depending upon the students' responses, the teacher may need to review the word again or continue with the next vocabulary word.

   • *"Joseph wanted to enhance the surprise birthday party for his parents, so he_____."*

   • *"The teacher wanted to enhance her knowledge of history, so she _____."*

After a teacher explicitly introduces the vocabulary words, it is extremely important to review the words multiple times so that the words can become part of a student's receptive and expressive vocabulary. Word knowledge and learning comprehension go hand-in-hand. Using a layered approach to vocabulary instruction equips students to excel in both.

Reference

Archer, A. & Hughes, C. (2011). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching*. New York: Guilford Press.

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