

## Teaching Tip: Vocabulary Instruction In Guided Reading and Beyond

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Traditionally when teachers are engaged in a Guided or Directed Reading Activity with their students, it is recommended that they address vocabulary prior to the reading of the selection. The assumption is that there are certain words that students may have difficulty identifying or need to know the meaning of to insure a successful reading experience. This may be the case, but often it is not. What is an unknown word to one student may be a known known word to another student. And often vocabulary words selected for study prior to reading may not be essential for comprehension of the selection. To the extent possible the most opportune time to address vocabulary is *after* the reading of a selection.

There are several reasons for reserving much of the vocabulary instruction to post-reading. First, is the factor of time. Prior to reading, time should be devoted primarily to accessing prior knowledge or predicting story events in order to develop student purposes for reading. When this is done effectively, students are eager to begin reading and not be delayed by word study activities.

A second factor has to do with context. Vocabulary is best developed in a meaningful context, and the selection per-se provides the best context for learning new vocabulary. Sometimes the text defines the word for the reader. For example, in an intermediate school selection on the Middle Ages, there is the following sentence: **The castles were surrounded by a water filled ditch called a moat.** In this instance the word *moat* is explicitly defined and requires no instruction, other than perhaps helping students to become aware of the convention of how texts often define words for the reader.

In another selection, Byars, (1968)) *The Midnight Fox*, Uncle Fred places a baby fox in a hutch to lure and catch the mother fox. After the reading and discussion of the story the teacher asks the students to talk about any interesting or new words they may have encountered. The following conversation might ensue:

St 1: I found out what a hutch was.

T: Talk about that. How did you do that?

St 1: Well, Uncle Fred put the baby fox in something that had a lock on it, so I figured it was some kind of cage or pen.

St 2: It actually said cage in another part of the story.

St 1: And there was a picture of a wire pen or cage, so I knew that was what a hutch was.

T: So, a hutch is a...

St 1: A cage for an animal.

T: Might a hutch be used for something other than animals? I suspect some of you might have a hutch In your house.

(Students skeptical, various responses, no way, no, not in our house, etc.)

St 5: Wait a minute. My grandmother has a hutch. She keeps her best dishes and forks and spoons in it. She calls it a hutch.

T: Can you describe it a bit more.

St 5: It has doors on it and it used to have a key you could lock it.

T: What do we know about this word, hutch?

(Students summarize and clarify the definition.)

T: Any other interesting or new words?

St 4: This wasn't a new word for me, but I thought it was interesting. It said, "*Suddenly, the rain began to slacken*" At first, I thought, What? Then I remembered I heard a man down the road say that the rain slacked off, so I knew that it wasn't raining as hard.

T: So what does slack or slacken mean?

St 3: It means something is slower?

St 4: Or less of?

T: Interesting, let's check the computer for its definition.

(Students verify the definition and discuss)

T: What other words or phrases would you like to talk about?

(Discussion of words and phrases continues for a few more minutes.)

In the scene above, these grade five students are talking about new or interesting words and phrases they encountered while reading. The words come out of a meaningful context and they see the relevancy of these words in the overall understanding and appreciation of the story. As a result, the learning of vocabulary is far more engaging and impactful to the students.

In some cases, an unknown word may be a barrier to the overall understanding of the text and thus should be addressed before reading. In order to make informed decisions about what terminology or vocabulary should be taught before reading and what can be reserved for in depth analysis after the reading the following guide is helpful.

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| <p>___ 1. Necessary for story/text comprehension</p> <p>___ 2. Not sufficiently defined by context</p> <p>___ 3. Defined by context explicitly</p> <p>___ 4. Defined by context implicitly</p> <p>___ 5. Not necessary for story/text comprehension, but an interesting word or phrase.</p> <p>Teach before reading and review after reading if conditions 1 and 2 are met.</p> <p>Teach or address after reading if conditions 1&amp;3, 1&amp;4, or 5 are met.</p> |
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By applying the above guide, vocabulary instruction becomes timelier and more effective.

Vocabulary can be taught in various situations during an instructional day, but when doing a Guided or Directed Reading or reading in subject areas such as social studies, science, and mathematics, the person in the best position to decide the what and when of vocabulary instruction is the classroom teacher.

The best way to develop students' vocabulary is through wide reading. However, coupling wide reading with timely discussions of words and phrases enhances students growth in language, reading, and writing.