

Preface

“The most powerful source of vocabulary instruction is the well-focused mind, seeking actively to understand” (Henderson, 1980). Our students learn vocabulary *their way* when they are focused on a topic of keen interest, trying to figure out the what, why, and how of it all. The focus may be a videogame, a novel, a car engine, setting up a webpage—it doesn’t matter, really, so long as they are focused. Students acquire the vocabulary of their focus with relative ease. Our challenge is to help them apply that natural tendency to areas in which they may not at first be as interested. You can help students become engaged with the *content* of what we are teaching and reveal aspects of words to them that they might not otherwise notice, and the effect on their academic performance will be noticeable.

Vocabulary knowledge—the understanding of words and the concepts they represent—is the single best indicator of students’ reading ability, comprehension, and familiarity with academic discourse (Anglin, 1993; Baumann, Kame’enui, & Ash, 2003; McKeown & Curtis, 1987; Schleppegrell, 2004; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Because of this, vocabulary is one of the best predictors of students’ success in school. As a teacher, because you are in the position to affect your students’ vocabulary development significantly, you will also open their worlds more expansively to them.

To teach vocabulary to our students effectively and engagingly is to teach vocabulary *their way*. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on learning a set number of specific words every week or every unit, this book is focused on helping you give students the tools to learn quite literally tens if not hundreds of thousands of words independently—and that is a more learner-friendly and effective approach.

You may teach Freshman English or Senior Honors English; you may teach biology, eighth grade history, or seventh grade math. Regardless of the ages, grades, and subjects you teach, however, you work with students whose brains are organized to detect *patterns*: patterns in the real world, patterns in topics and themes within and across specific content areas such as history/social studies and science, and patterns in *words*. Patterns in words exist on three levels: sound, spelling, and meaning.

Understanding the relationship between spelling and meaning at the middle and secondary grades will be a profoundly important insight for students. Understanding the *meaning* of a word is often a clue to its spelling, and understanding the spelling of a word may in turn be a key to understanding its meaning. You can provide the support students need by helping them detect these patterns in words. In so doing, you help them learn specific words and you help them learn *about* words.

In recent years, vocabulary researchers have emphasized the role of *word consciousness* in vocabulary learning: the knowledge and predisposition to learn, appreciate, and effectively use words (Graves, 2006; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Teachers play a pivotal role in developing this awareness in their students and in helping students grow their vocabularies effectively and engagingly—*their way*. Toward this end, teachers develop their own knowledge base about words and how they work, and as a consequence their vocabulary instruction is much more confident, enjoyable, and effective.

We hope this book will help you build a strong foundation in this knowledge base for English vocabulary, as well as the vocabulary of specific academic areas. There is much that teachers can learn right along with students. If you’re open to the possibilities

such learning offers, you will also find that your teaching and your students' learning will be much, much more effective and rewarding.

A GUIDE TO USING THIS BOOK

- Chapter 1 sets the stage for teaching vocabulary *their* way, briefly presenting what we know about how words are learned based on the significant research that has explored how to teach words and how to teach about words.
- Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will provide the foundation in how words work in English and where words come from. You'll find answers to the questions students and teachers often ask about words, such as why a single word can have several different meanings or why we don't spell words the way they sound (and why there are different spellings for the same sound). This knowledge will be a strong support for your instruction, and equally important, will provide you with the confidence to explore words more deeply with your students. Although you are encouraged to page through the whole book, sampling here and there, looking for your own specific teaching interests and responsibilities, you are also encouraged to return for a careful reading of Chapters 2 and 3. If you do so, the payoff for your instruction should be significant, and you may further develop your own vocabulary and spelling!
- Chapter 4 addresses the essentials of vocabulary instruction—how to select which words to teach, how to select the meaningful features of words on which to focus (prefixes, suffixes, bases, and roots), and how to teach specific words as well as how to teach *about* words.
- Chapters 5 and 6 apply the essentials presented in Chapter 4 to instruction in specific subject matter areas. Chapter 5 addresses vocabulary in narratives and the instruction about words that most often is the responsibility of English/language arts teachers, while Chapter 6 addresses vocabulary in the different content areas. Building on the basic approach presented in Chapter 4, Chapters 5 and 6 emphasize how to teach about the important Greek and Latin roots and affixes that are reflected in the vocabulary of English, mathematics, social studies/history, and the sciences.
- While English learners are mentioned throughout the book, Chapter 7 directly addresses the challenges and opportunities for English learners' vocabulary instruction in the middle and secondary grades. Instruction in cognates is highlighted, supporting an approach that begins with obvious relationships among words across languages and moves to more subtle but important relationships that cognates reflect.
- Chapter 8 provides straightforward ways to assess students' vocabulary knowledge in your specific subject matter area. Many of these assessments reflect the types of instructional strategies and activities that have been presented throughout the book. Informed assessment is based on an understanding of the literacy and learning development of your students, and Chapter 8 elaborates on a developmental model that should help guide your instructional decisions.
- The Appendixes at the end of the book provide (1) lessons that may serve as templates for your instruction; (2) assessment materials; and (3) games for developing and reinforcing understanding of words and important structural or *morphological* features of words.

In closing, we wish to point out that we include quite a bit of *narrative* in this book—explanations about words in examples of teacher conversation and in student lessons. Our hope is that you may try on the language of these narratives as you become comfortable with them, adapting them to your own style, and using some or all of them as “templates” for your own narratives and conversations about words.