

## In the Classroom 42

# Strategies for Teaching Vocabulary to College Students

---

SEE THE SHOW NOTES AT: <http://tubarksblog.com/itc42>

---

**Speaker:** Hello, everyone. Thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. You can be doing many other things, but you're hanging out with me. I really do appreciate it. This week, we are going to look at the importance of teaching vocabulary to the learning process. Basically, if somebody has a poor vocabulary, it probably is impeding their reading and impeding their learning. Let's get into it. Why is it important to teach and learn vocabulary? Well, as I noted, poor vocabulary is a learning impediment. As I noted in my book, *Read to Succeed*, a strong vocabulary will help you extract exact meaning of what someone has said or written.

We need this in our classroom. We are introducing students to a lot of new content and a lot of new words, words that they may not necessarily be familiar with. We need to make sure that we're also taking time to teaching those particular words. An improved vocabulary will also help with speaking and writing. If you are unfamiliar with a word, then you tend to subvocalize. This slows down your reading rate. If you're able to read faster, you have improved comprehension. You can also consume more content. Those are some of the reasons why we need to help students develop their vocabulary.

Why did I choose this topic? This topic came about, I was inspired by the book from Katie Novak called, *UDL Now! A Teacher's Guide to Applying Universal Design for Learning in Today's Classrooms*. She had a chapter entirely dedicated to vocabulary. The reason that she talked about it is because it's one of those principals that is in the universal design for learning. In there, it talks about that the need to clarify vocabulary and symbols has a way to help students better understand the course content that we are providing. That's why. With vocabulary, there are three tiers of vocabulary. The first tier is the basic vocabulary. This is words that are commonly found in oral communication, somewhere around 7,000 words people just know. We don't have to teach those. Those are just, everyone knows them. However, tiers two and three we need to focus on. Tier two is high-frequency words that they're also multiple-meaning vocabulary. These are words that cross multiple domains. This is found in mature language, adult language, adult conversation. This is words that are typically found in our literature. They're above the speaking set of words that we have. They're just a little more complex. They're words that you wouldn't normally find in spoken text, but you definitely are going to recognize them in speaking text. For some, they just may not know the meanings of these words.

Then, tier three. Tier three is really what applies to what we view as educators, these are low-frequency, content-specific vocabulary. These words occur in specific domains. If you are an artist, there are certain words, vocabulary that come with that

domain. If you are a business instructor, you have certain words that are part of that domain. Computer science has a whole different set of words, biology, all these different domains have very specific words that are part of their domain. That really comes into play for what we're doing.

Once upon a time, getting close to forty years now, I was at the Air Force Academy prep school. While I was there, we typically had four classes per day. One of those classes was an English class dedicated to teaching vocabulary and speed-reading. We were probably learning at that time hundreds of new words each week. We would have these comprehensive exams that were cumulative. For the words that we were learning in the first week, 16 weeks into it, we were still seeing them on test, that they just kept popping up. The cool thing is, 40 years later, I see one of these words written down and I just can't help but smile because I know exactly where I learned that particular word. It has helped me immensely. It helped my speed for reading. It helped my comprehension. It has just been a really powerful tool to keep moving on.

What can we do as instructors to improve vocabulary? The first thing is, pre-teach the vocabulary and these different symbols. Before you're asking students to dive into the textbook, you may want to go over words that they are going to see and give them some ideas in context before they dive into that particular content. When you're teaching this word, also teach it in how it applies to their personal lives. See if you can find examples that you can tie it back. Any time you can tie things back to previous knowledge, that's what you want to do.

Another way that you can do this is, have, maybe, students identify to you which words you want to have defined. You can have them do a pre-scan of the book in class and highlight words, have them shout out words that you can write up on the board that they want to understand before they dive into that text. Most-do words in a book, maybe, highlight it bolded, depending on the level of the book that you happen to be reading. Any time that you can use imagery to make the word more concrete, you should try doing that. If you are a science teacher and you're talking about a certain cell, parts of a cell, any time that you can add an image to it helps with students to remember that word, adding that imagery. Use that cool brain stuff. Attach different hooks in the brain to that word. Part of it is from imagery. Part of it is narration. Part of it deals with that definition. The more hooks you can make, the more likely that they're going to remember them.

You certainly want to teach the vocabulary in context, how this particular word is being used and to use it as somebody who is an expert in that field, how they would use this word and use it appropriately. Glossaries, different learning management systems have glossaries. I know Blackboard and Moodle, they have a glossary. You can have words defined in there. When you happen to have a word, like in Moodle, if you mouse-over a word, that you will also get the definition for that word. If you can build out glossaries, that's a useful tool.

Also, embedded support for vocabulary, if you're using a learning management system that you can link these special words, that you can link out to a definition. Students, if they need that additional help at that moment, they can link to it, or you can link to an image, something that ties it back together. You can make your text very interactive.

That provides that additional support, especially for unfamiliar phrases or unfamiliar references in text and just link out to them. Having vocabulary quizzes. For a couple episodes, I talked about test polls and mastery quizzes. One of the things that you can do is, maybe before you even release the content to the students for them to read, is provide a vocabulary list that you want them to learn, then provide a quiz. Based on the quiz, allows them that access to that new content. You can have that adaptive release piece tied in.

Also, you can build special practice quizzes that are just concentrating on vocabulary and build up that vocabulary set. Have students to do this maybe for extra credit, or maybe it's a requirement that they have to pass these vocabulary quizzes at a certain level to get credit as part of the course. Make it so that they can do this repeatedly as many times as they want and you're just pulling those questions from a test poll. Having students, requiring them to use these new words in their writing, figure out exercises, writing exercises where they have to use these words or as part of presentations that they have to incorporate these words in their presentation.

Also, teach students strategies for finding words in content and how to discern meaning while they're doing that, while they're reading specific chapters or sections, whatever that you want. If they come across a word, how they can figure out what the word is. I'm going to also leave you with seven other strategies. These are strategies that I had put into my book, Read to Succeed. They're basically vocabulary-building strategies. There are seven of them.

The first one is, have students just be aware of the words that are unfamiliar, that they can go ahead and circle these words. They can also write the definitions, maybe in the margins of the book for anything that's unfamiliar with them, so they can learn these particular words. I would encourage them also to keep reading. Number two is keep reading, have a continued and varying reading habit, that they're not stuck in one genre, that they're going out and reading across multiple genres. One of the goals that I set is I participate in modern Mrs. Darcy's reading challenge. She has these different 12 categories of books. It's taking me well outside of my lane, outside of my comfort zone. It's causing me to come across new words because of this reading. By reading in different disciplines that will help stretch the vocabulary. Definitely keep encouraging them to read the textbook, read all the textbooks that they have, because they're taking such a diverse set of courses. Also encourage them to read really complex articles at least once a week. That'll cause them to stretch it in terms of their vocabulary also.

Number three, have a vocabulary notebook. Have them have a place where they can record new words that they are learning and what the definitions to those words are. It could be a paper notebook, it could be a digital notebook, it doesn't matter. Just having that type of reference that they can continue to go back to. Having a dictionary is number four, keeping that handy. It can be paper-based or it can be digital. I personally use the digital, that I will go to Google and type in the search field, defined **[unintelligible 00:11:06]** and whatever the word is. That will pop up a definition for me. It usually has synonyms and antonyms. It will also tell me how to pronounce that particular word, which that has been very useful. That's one way to do it.

Students can also do number five, which is word today programs. Subscribing to this, I subscribe to a program called Word genius. This allows me to test my vocabulary. Some days, it'll send me a definition of a word. Other times it will just challenge me with these questions that I have to take these questions. I can also participate in these quizzes that allow me to test my knowledge on those particular words.

Number six is learning Latin roots. If you learn Latin roots, suffixes, prefixes, you can figure out the meaning of all kinds of words or at least get the general idea. For example, the Latin root scribe or script, which means to write, and when you add prefixes and suffixes you figure out all these other words, like subscriber, scripture, description, postscript, prescription, unscripted, scribbling. All kinds of words that all tie back to that one root. By understanding these different roots, it's huge as far as figuring out all these other words.

The last one is just dedicated vocabulary building book. When I was at the Air Force Academy prep school, we probably had three or four of these books that had hundreds and hundreds of words in each one of them that we were working through as part of the curriculum. They define terms, but also they would quiz you on previous terms. Like I said, I can only smile when I cross across one of those words that I know specifically was in that book though, definitely pretty fascinating.

Those are some strategies on how to teach vocabulary. Start with the pre-teaching. Pull out those lists of words, let students know what they're going to be getting into. Also teach them some strategies where they can do this on their own, where they don't necessarily need you, so they can be those lifelong learners. Speaking of vocabulary, if you want to know a little bit more about this, I'm going to give you a quick plug for my book where you can find more information.