



	59,567	55.2	15,749
Unemployed	27,495	60.2	8,116
Not Employed or Seeking Work			

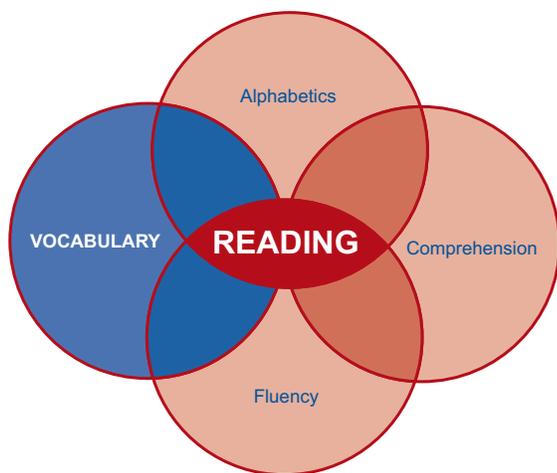
Vocabulary: Research and Teaching Strategies

This research digest on vocabulary is one of a series that reviews four components of reading: alphabetic, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The digest contains a discussion of current research on vocabulary, provides references, and suggests strategies for teaching vocabulary skills to adults.

Vocabulary Defined

Vocabulary is the knowledge of word meanings. A person's vocabulary consists of all the words he or she knows and understands. Adult learners frequently have larger oral vocabularies than reading vocabularies; they know the meanings of more words than they can read.

The Four Components of Reading



The Need for Vocabulary Instruction

From as early as the 1920's, educators have known that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary and reading achievement (Kamil, 2004). The exact nature of that correlation is a matter for debate and further research (for an in-depth discussion, see Curtis, 2006). However, according to the National Reading Panel (2000b), we know that "vocabulary occupies an important middle ground in learning to read. Oral vocabulary is a key to learning to make the transition from oral to written forms. Reading vocabulary is crucial to the comprehension process of a skilled reader" (p. 4-3).

Assessment of Vocabulary

Strucker (1997) suggests that reading assessments that consist entirely of silent reading followed by oral or written questions are not the most effective way to profile a learner's vocabulary skills. Formats such as multiple choice tests also are limited in what they can reveal about learners' vocabularies. A preferable method is for the teacher to say the words aloud before asking learners to define them. If the teacher asks the learners to read the words aloud, the oral assessment may not be valid. The student may know the meaning of the word but be unable to read it. The teacher can avoid confounding the results of the oral assessment by eliminating outside factors such as a learner's inability to read the words.

An example of an oral assessment of vocabulary is the *Word Meaning Test*, which consists of sets of five words at 10 graded levels. Learners must correctly define four out of five words to move to the next level of the test. At the lowest level, learners must define words such as *home*, *train*, *confuse*, *start*, and *climb*. At the highest level, learners must define words such as *tedious*, *repulsive*, *indifferent*, *inconsistent*, and *punctual*. Teachers can download the *Word Meaning Test* at no cost from The National Institute for Literacy's test bank at www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/MC_Test_Bank.htm.

Learning and Teaching Vocabulary

Although there is limited research within the field of adult education on specific approaches to assessment and instruction of vocabulary, there is much that adult educators can learn from the National Reading Panel's examination of K-12 research on vocabulary (2000a), and there is a wealth of adult education practitioner wisdom on teaching vocabulary skills.

An approach that has been effective in increasing adult learners' vocabularies is encouraging learners to read a wide variety of texts while providing them with instructional support (Curtis, 2006). Studies have also found that teaching vocabulary in family or workplace settings may lead to greater increases in vocabulary (McDonald, 1997).

Using context clues to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words is a common activity in many reading classes; however, certain conditions must exist in order for readers to benefit from context clues. Readers

typically need to understand 98 percent of the words in a passage before context helps them understand new words (Nation, 2000). For adult learners with limited vocabularies, this presents a problem. English language learners in particular need instructional support because they have fewer words in their vocabularies than native English-speaking learners (Eskey, 2005). English language learners have an estimated 2,000 to 7,000 words in their vocabularies, while fluent English speakers have between 10,000 to 100,000 (Hadley, 2005). Both groups of learners benefit from having the difficult words pre-taught by teachers who use precise definitions in accessible language (Curtis, 2006; McKeown, 1993).

Given the potential universe of words that authors can use in any given text, teachers and learners need to think strategically and target certain types of vocabulary words. Learners can benefit by focusing on high-frequency words (Nation, 2000). Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) define three tiers of words based on frequency of use. The first tier consists of words that are common, concrete, and used in daily conversation. English language learners often pick up these words independently or in beginning-level English classes. The second tier consists of words that learners encounter in written text more than in conversation and whose meanings may not be immediately apparent based on context clues. Learners need direct instruction to master Tier Two words. The third tier consists of discipline-specific vocabulary or jargon. Authors usually provide definitions for Tier Three words when these words appear in texts; therefore, teaching Tier Three words is not as useful as teaching Tier Two words. Being familiar with and understanding Tier Two words that they are likely to encounter in reading helps learners read with less disruption and therefore with increased comprehension. It is also helpful for learners to identify and understand the signal words (e.g., *however*, *similarly*, *consequently*, *although*) that provide structure to texts (Curtis, 2006).

Learners may benefit from vocabulary instruction that is ongoing and integrated into other classroom activities. Multiple exposures to the same word in different contexts may help learners develop a deeper understanding of a word's multiple meanings and nuances (e.g., learners can discuss the meaning of the word *cloud* as a noun and as a verb and explain how when one's mind clouds, it feels like a film has settled over one's thoughts).

Tier One	Tier Two	Tier Three
friend	demonstrate	annuity
morning	intuitive	riparian
house	magnetic	fauvism
work	notion	spirochete
daughter	presume	parquet
right	simultaneous	photosynthesis
very	ultimate	antebellum

Samples of three tiers of words based on Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002)

Teaching Strategies

Direct instruction of vocabulary

With direct instruction of word meanings, the teacher introduces a word and its meaning, and learners are guided to find contexts in which the word can be applied. This technique, adapted from Curtis and Bercovitz (2004), is more effective than asking learners to guess word meanings from contexts, and involves three steps:

1. Tell learners the meaning of the word using words they understand. If the word has multiple meanings, teach only one meaning.
2. Provide a context for the word in a full sentence.
3. Help the learners connect a personal context to the word.

For example, for direct instruction of the word ***lark***, an instructor might say:

1. A ***lark*** is a silly game or a bit of fun. In the story we were reading, the main character decided to learn to tap dance as a lark—as something to laugh at or have fun with. It was not something he took seriously.
2. Tom started his tour guide business as a lark but discovered he could make a good salary.
3. Tell me something you have done as a lark—as a silly game or just for a laugh. We had a word yesterday that is related to lark. When you look back into your word journals or vocabulary boxes, what word comes to mind? (the word ***prank***)

Multiple contexts for word meanings

Learners benefit from being exposed to word meanings in multiple contexts. This can be accomplished in the classroom by providing a variety of reading materials. For example, if the class is examining the word ***tradition***, the teacher can present articles that focus on traditions in areas such as art, music, dance, cooking, child-rearing, education, and government. After learners are comfortable with a word's meaning, they can apply the meaning of the word to a new context. The learner can see the relationship between the meaning of the word ***tradition*** in cooking and the meaning of the word ***tradition*** in government.

Frequency words

Beginning readers sometimes believe they should understand the meaning of every word in the dictionary. They may benefit from learning the concept of frequency words—that there are some words that are used far more than others and should therefore be the focus of learners' efforts. *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* provides a

list of words that make up about 50 percent of all written material (Fry & Kress, 2006).

Word learning strategies

An effective way to assist intermediate adult readers in building vocabulary is to ensure that instruction emphasizes differences as well as similarities among word meanings.

Through direct instruction, teachers can assist learners in analyzing the relationships among word meanings by comparing words, classifying them into groups, studying figurative language, and making analogies. Encouraging learners to explicitly explain the connections they see among word meanings helps them build depth of vocabulary. Specific word learning strategies include instruction in

- Prefixes, suffixes, and roots
- Using the dictionary
- Signal words, such as **therefore**, **however**, **consequently**, and **despite**
- Idiomatic expressions, such as **hit the nail on the head** or **stiff upper lip**
- Homophones—words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings, such as **board** and **bored**, **sail** and **sale**, **flea** and **flee**
- Homographs—words that look the same but have different meanings, such as **fair** (market, exhibition) and **fair** (equitable), **mine** (gold mine) and **mine** (belonging to me)

New word of the day

To build breadth of vocabulary, learners need to encounter new words often. Teachers can select a new word each day, write it on the chalkboard, and ask learners to read it aloud, define it, and discuss its use.

Word journals

Learners may benefit from keeping word journals about words they have already learned. Once the learner understands the word, he or she can record it in a word journal, noting its formal definition, associations the learner makes with the word, and sample sentences in which the word is used.

Quadrant charts

A strategy suggested by Curtis and Bercovitz (2004) is to have learners create quadrant charts by dividing 5x7 cards into four quadrants and writing the following words in the quadrants:

important word	synonyms
personal association	antonyms

The teacher asks the learners to write a word in the *important word* section in the upper left quadrant and then encourages learners to brainstorm and record synonyms and antonyms, and note personal associations they have with the word. After modeling the quadrant chart as a large group activity, the teacher encourages learners to use the technique independently and to build personal collections of vocabulary cards.

Word card games

Concentration, played with words and their definitions, is a beneficial game for learners. Another is *Word Sorts*, in which the teacher creates a set of word cards based on a theme (e.g., transportation) and asks the learners to divide the cards into groups. Learners read through the cards, discuss the meanings of the words, and sort their cards into groups. Learners will benefit from articulating the reasons for their choices and naming the groups (e.g., public and private or fast and slow).

Professional Development

Workshops

CALPRO offers two 4-hour *Research-Based Adult Reading Instruction* workshops in which adult educators examine the definitions and research basis of the four components of reading and practice instructional and assessment strategies for each component. In *Session 1*, participants explore alphabets and fluency, and in *Session 2*, vocabulary and comprehension. For workshop information, visit the CALPRO Web site, www.calpro-online.org, and click on the “calendar,” or contact your local CALPRO Professional Development Center.

Study Circles

CALPRO promotes site-based professional development on adult reading instruction by training teachers to facilitate study circles at their agencies. Study circles offer teachers an opportunity to develop their knowledge base in reading instruction as they read about, discuss, and explore the latest research on reading. For information on study circle facilitator training, visit the CALPRO Web site or call 800-427-1422, toll-free in California.

Additional Resources on Vocabulary

The Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS)
www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/arcs.htm

Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers
www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/adult.html

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
www.ncsall.net

National Institute for Literacy
www.nifl.gov

Reading and Adult English Language Learners:
 A Review of the Research
www.cal.org/caela/research/raell.pdf

References

Beck, I., McKeown, M., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Curtis, M.E. (2006). The role of vocabulary instruction in adult basic education. In J. Comings, B. Garner, & C. Smith (Eds.), *Review of adult learning and literacy* (Vol. 6, pp. 43-70). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Curtis, M.E., & Bercovitz, L.S. (2004). *Reading toolkit for intermediate level adult basic education*. Washington, DC: Division of Adult Education and Literacy, Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Eskey, D. (2005). Reading in a second language. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 563-580). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Fry, E.B., & Kress, J.E. (2006). *The reading teacher's book of lists*. Jossey-Bass teacher. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hadley, A.O. (2005). *Teaching language in context*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Kamil, M.L. (2004). Vocabulary and comprehension instruction. In P. McCardle and V. Chhabra (Eds.), *The voice of evidence in reading research* (pp. 213-234). Baltimore, MD: P.H. Brookes Publishers.

McDonald, B.A. (1997). The impact of content-based instruction: Three studies. *Focus on Basics*, 1(D), 20-22.

McKeown, M.G. (1993). Creating effective definitions for young word learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 16-31.

National Reading Panel. (2000a). *Report of the national reading panel: Teaching children to read*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

National Reading Panel. (2000b). *Report of the national reading panel: Teaching children to read—Reports of the subgroups*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Nation, I.M.P. (2000). Learning vocabulary in lexical sets: Dangers and guidelines. *TESOL Journal*, 9(2), 6-10.

Strucker, J. (1997). What silent reading tests alone can't tell you. *Focus on Basics*, 1(B), 13-16.

Produced by the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO) of the American Institutes for Research, under contract with the California Department of Education.

Authors: Erik Jacobson, Montclair State University
Sally Ianiro, CALPRO

Editors: Mary Ann Corley, CALPRO
Phil Esra, American Institutes for Research

Contributor: John Strucker, World Education

