

1. There are so many words to choose from! When teaching a vocabulary lesson which words should be taught?

It is true that teachers face several issues which sometimes makes choosing vocabulary words confusing. First of all, there is no agreed upon list of best individual words to teach. Second, there is no definitive research based method for approaching the issue how to choose words. Finally, teachers' choices may vary depending on grade level and the reading ability of their students.

Given these variables researchers here at the University of Utah have looked at current research and best practices in vocabulary instruction. Dole, Liang, and Nelson (2007) propose the following five possible approaches to choosing vocabulary words:

1. Teach a group of words that have related meanings or related to a single topic
2. Teach words that are important to the understanding of selection or because of their general usefulness
3. Teach words that are "conceptually difficult" (i.e., not part of everyday experiences) such as *superconductor* as opposed to *superfluous* (Nagy, 1988)
4. Teach words teachers want to be incorporated into their writing or speaking (Dun and Graves, 1987)
5. Teach words based on a three-tiered approach (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002)

To learn more about selecting vocabulary words based on the three-tiered approach and to see multiple examples of how to choose vocabulary words using this approach please read *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* by Beck, McKeown, & Kucan.

2. I am a new first grade teacher. I think I know all of the early reading skill I should be assessing to monitor my students' progress and to make instructional decisions. Just in case I have forgotten one, could you please give me a check list of which early reading skills teachers should assess?

Sure. Reutzel and Cooter (2008) list a fairly standard check list in *Teaching Children to Read: The Teacher Makes the Difference*. Their list is as follows:

- ✓ Oral language development
- ✓ Concepts about print
- ✓ Phonological and phonemic awareness
- ✓ Letter name knowledge
- ✓ Sight word recognition
- ✓ Phonics knowledge
- ✓ Vocabulary
- ✓ Comprehension

3. How can I fit several reading groups in one day?

As you might expect, the answer varies according to your particular situation. Some teachers see each of their reading groups every day, while others meet with each reading group every other day. There may even be occasional days when you have only whole-group instruction. Review the block of time you have for reading instruction and determine what will work best in your classroom. With older students you might decide to have four reading groups and see each group every day for 30 minutes.

Another alternative for younger students is to have a shorter time with reading groups. For example, you may have four groups for 15 minutes each day. If support resources are available, a reading specialist may take one group for 45 minutes while the classroom teacher has two groups for 20 minutes each. If an arrangement isn't working well, try something different.

4. I know that my district is assessing my students reading fluency by using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test. I am feeling anxious about my students' performance on this assessment and want them to do their absolute best. How can I help them succeed? What does the research say about effective fluency instruction?

You are probably already doing many positive things to improve your students reading fluency. However, it is important for you know the characteristics of effective fluency instruction so that you can use all the research available to help your students. Here are seven characteristics of effective fluency instruction (& practice) which come from evidence-based research (Reutzel & Cooter, 2008).

- Explicit instruction. This includes explaining to students the importance of fluency as one of their goals to help them become better readers. It is also important to help students understand what we mean by the term fluency so that they can monitor their reading and “go about fixing up” (Reutzel & Cooter 2008, p. 157) any problems the encounter in the text.
- Modeling. Some children benefit from exposure to rich and varied models of fluent oral reading. Other children benefit from experiencing examples of reading that is not fluent. In other words, some students need both examples of fluent reading and examples of non-fluent reading in order to understand the concept of fluency and its characteristics.
- Reading practice. Research has indicated that good readers are given more opportunities to read connected text for longer periods of time than students who are experiencing difficulty reading. This is a problem. The National Reading Panel (2000) has stressed the need for students to experience regular, daily reading practice.
- Access to appropriately challenging reading materials. Research (Gambrell, Wilson, Gnatt, 1981.) has shown that good readers spend more time reading books on the appropriate reading level than students who are

struggling with reading. Reading books on their instructional level along with instruction and feedback may help good readers transition from reading word-by-word to fluent reading. On the other hand, poor readers often spend the majority of their time reading books that are above their instructional reading level. Therefore struggling readers are denied access to reading materials that could help them develop fluent reading. Educators need to increase the amount of students' reading in appropriately leveled texts in the beginning stages of fluency development (Hiebert & Fisher, 2006).

- Use of oral and silent reading. The National Reading Panel (2000) reported that there was sufficient evidence to support the following reading fluency practices: 1) oral reading, 2) repeated readings of a text, 3) guidance and feedback both during and after the reading of the text. However, silent reading of self-chosen books without feedback or monitoring was not shown to have enough research-based evidence to support its exclusive use as a reading practice in the elementary grades. Recent research has suggested that modified silent reading (wide reading across genre or text types with monitoring) appears to produce equivalent or better fluency gains in second and third grade children when compared to oral repeat readings (Bryan, Fawson, & Reutzel, 2003; Kuhn, 2005; Marzano, 2004; McKenna & Stahl, 2003; Stahl, 2004)
- Monitoring and accountability. In the past, teachers have believed that simply modeling silent reading was sufficient to promote student reading. This idea has never been proven to be true. More recent research indicates that teacher monitoring with quick stops listens to individual student's oral reading and to discuss a piece of text has a positive effect on student engagement during silent reading time.
- Wide and repeated reading. There is considerable research that indicates repeat readings of the same text leads to fast, accurate and effortless word recognition (NRP, 2000). Once students have reached this level of automaticity, wide reading seems to move students from fluency to comprehension.

By being aware of all seven of the characteristics of effective fluency instruction, you can help you students do their absolute best.

References

- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: Guilford.
- Bryan, G., Fawson, P.C., & Reutzel, D.R. (2003). Sustained silent reading: Exploring the value of literature discussion with three non-engaged readers. *Reading Research and Instruction, 43*(1), 47-73.
- Dole, J., Liang, L.A., & Nelson, K. (2007). Teaching vocabulary to all your students. Session conducted at the annual conference of the Utah Council of the International Reading Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Gambrell, L.B., Wilson, R.M., & Gnat, W.N. (1981). Classroom observations of task-attending behaviors of good and poor readers. *Journal of Educational Research, 74*, 400-404.
- Hiebert, E.H., & Fisher, P. (2006). Fluency from the first: What works with first graders. In T.V. Rasinski, C. Blachowicz, & K. Lems (Eds.) *Fluency instruction: Research-based best practices* (pp. 279-294). New York: Guilford Press.
- Kuhn, M. (2005). A comparative study of small group fluency instruction. *Reading Psychology, 26*, 127-146.
- Marzano, R.J. (2004). *Building background knowledge for academic achievement: Research on what works in schools*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- McKenna, M.C., & Stahl, S.A. (2003). *Assessment for reading instruction*. New York: Guilford Press.
- National Reading Panel (NRP). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
- Reutzel, D.R., & Cooter R.B. (2008). *Teaching children to read: The teacher makes the difference*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson.
- Stahl, K. (2004). Proof, practice, and promise: Comprehension strategy instruction in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher, 57*(7), 598-609.