

A Word Selection Grid

Choosing Vocabulary to Teach

by Margie Gillis and Nancy Chapel Eberhardt

Given the vast number of vocabulary words students need to learn, it is critical to be deliberate in selecting words to teach. A number of approaches for choosing words are available, including one from Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013), whose system is based on tiers; Biemiller (1999, 2010) who emphasizes word families; and Dutro and Moran (2003) who distinguish between “brick” and “mortar” words when discussing academic vocabulary. A common denominator of these approaches for selecting words is the question of word utility, in other words “why is this word worth teaching?”

Rarely, however, do the selection approaches factor in instructional practices found effective in teaching vocabulary. All too often the selection process for words and consideration of instructional practices seem to operate dichotomously. How can educators reconcile these two dimensions—selection and instruction—of vocabulary instruction?

A Word Selection Tool

In response to this question, we propose a Word Selection Grid (see Figure 1)—a tool to guide choosing vocabulary

words coupled with effective instructional practices. Rather than exclusively emphasizing utility, the grid integrates word utility with instructional methods and activities to teach whichever words we select.

The Word Selection Grid presents two dimensions: selection and activities. The rows of the grid organize words according to tiers, or their level of utility. The columns provide the instructional dimension. The first three represent important and teachable dimensions—multiple meanings, morphological elements, and networkable meanings in content areas. Here’s a closer look:

- Knowledge of the multiple meanings of words, called polysemy, helps grow vocabulary with even the easiest Tier 1 words. For example, the word *bat*, which is considered a Tier 1 word in Beck’s system and would not require instructional emphasis, could be selected to work on as a word with multiple meanings (e.g., an animal, a piece of sports equipment, or a swinging action).

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Content (Brick) Words				Utility (Mortar) Words
	Multiple Meaning (Polysemy)	Morphological Elements	Word Networks	Academic Vocabulary (Examples provided)
Tier 1	bat (animal, action, sport equipment)	bat/bats	bat , mammal, habitat, sonar ³	and, in, on it, they write, think, look, sort
Tier 2	season (time of year, flavoring for food)	seasons, seasoning, seasoned, season	season , climate, weather, environment, temperature, geography	because, then, it, them locate, understand, describe
Tier 3	bat , as part of common phrases or idioms (e.g., <i>bat your eyes, go to bat for someone</i>) blue (a color, a feeling of dejection) and as part of a common phrase or idiom (e.g., <i>out of the blue</i> , meaning suddenly)	seasonal (-al), batty (-y), unlock (un-), reread (re-), bluest (-est) ⁶ evaporate, -s, -ed, -ion for evaporates, evaporated, and evaporation	evaporation , liquid, gas, atmosphere, moisture	however, therefore its, their analyze, imagine, prove

Figure 1. Word Selection Grid

Starting Over

Two girls in Sri Lanka walk past the rubble that was once their school. It was destroyed in the **tsunami** (soo-NAH-mee), or series of huge waves, that hit South Asia in December of 2005.

Since then, temporary schools have been set up in buildings that are still standing and in tents. The girls, along with thousands of other students, can now return to school.

“The opening of these schools is a powerful sign for people that life can begin again,” said Carol Bellamy, the director of **UNICEF** - a group that helps children in need. UNICEF and other groups have donated thousands of tents and school supplies to countries affected by the tsunami.

Content Words				Utility Words
	Multiple Meaning (Polysemy)	Morphological Elements	Word Networks	Academic Vocabulary (Examples provided)
Tier 1	wave (motion of hand to say good by; moving water in the ocean)	wave(s), tent(s), build(s), build(ing)	wave , ocean, water, splash	
Tier 2	opening (a hole or space that you can go through; the first time something happens) sign (wood or paper with words or pictures to give information; write name on documents; an indication that something will happen)	power(ful), donate(d)	tsunami , wave, huge, series, destroyed, rubble	since then, temporary, affected by
Tier 3			Sri Lanka, UNICEF	

Figure 2. Example of Organizing Words from Informational Text.

- Morphological elements, namely prefixes, roots, and suffixes, can also contribute to vocabulary growth. Through the use of affixes, a base word can be expanded to convey tense (e.g., past), number (i.e., plural), description (e.g., -y to indicate a characteristic of something), and so on depending on the meaning of the affix. For example, *bat* could also be used to illustrate a word family based on the impact of inflectional endings signaling tense—*bats, batting, batted*—or a suffix to turn a word into a descriptive term, such as *batty*.
- Word networks provide another way to increase vocabulary within and across content areas. For instance, if the intent of instruction is to help children build knowledge networks around words, *bat* could be the starting point for a set of words describing characteristics of this

animal (e.g., *mammal, habitat, sonar*). These methods and activities are especially useful for teaching content (i.e., “brick”) words. Word networks can also be used to help students learn sets of words that share synonymous meanings (e.g., *miniature, petite, and small*) or shades of meaning (e.g., *small, larger, gigantic*).

The last column of the grid focuses on the group of words that holds our language together (i.e., “mortar”) to make it comprehensible. As Duto and Moran explain (2003), “mortar” words connect ideas (e.g., *because, but, however*), show the relationship between words (e.g., *on, under, between*), make it possible to refer to nouns (e.g., *it, they*), and are the utility words used across the content areas to direct instruction and learning (e.g., *describe, analyze, compare*). Together these

words focus on an aspect of vocabulary development needed for academic learning; hence, they are included in the category of words we call academic vocabulary. Methods and instructional activities to develop this area of vocabulary overlap extensively with instruction in grammar and syntax and rely on visualization, sentence frames, and context-based examples and non-examples to develop both their understanding and correct usage.

Using the Word Selection Grid to Select Words

The Word Selection Grid is suggested as a planning tool for teachers. At the most basic level, the grid can raise awareness of the words to select. At a more strategic level, the grid can help organize words from a text selection according to their intended instructional use (i.e., a specific activity) or for the needs of students (e.g., English learners, disadvantaged language learners, and proficient readers). The goal with the grid is not to fill in every cell for each reading selection but rather to consider the word selection for its potential for developing multiple and varied word-learning skills.

Figure 2 is an example of using the grid to organize words from an informational text passage.

Why select these words from *Starting Over*? As an informational text selection, the focus for choosing content words is on the central vocabulary word for the passage—**tsunami**. The Tier 1 words are selected to ensure that students understand the multiple meanings of **wave** and the network of words related to the meaning of **wave** relevant to the selection (i.e., moving water versus a motion of the hand). In Tier 2, the main emphasis is on the word **tsunami**—what it is and what it does—hence the word network draws upon words in the passage that explain their association. The multiple meaning word **opening** is pertinent because the passage has to do with starting over after a disaster like a **tsunami**; the word **sign** is also relevant to the notion of starting over. The words selected for morphological attention provide additional practice with vocabulary central to the topic. In Tier 3, the selections reflect a lower-incidence of utility in general but lead to useful background information in this context. The utility words focus on the temporal (time) aspects of the event explained in the selection.

When Words Have Been Selected

Many textbooks, particularly in content areas, identify vocabulary words that are important to understand a chapter or unit of study. These words are frequently presented in bold or highlighted font within the text or are listed at the beginning or end of the chapter. When words have been identified in the text, the task for the teacher changes. Rather than being responsible for selecting the words, the task shifts to determining how to help students learn them. Organizing pre-selected words

within the Word Selection Grid can help teachers look at the teachable dimensions of the words and choose activities that are appropriate for the list of pre-selected words. Instead of having students memorize a list of words and definitions, the grid can help identify words with multiple meanings, morphological patterns, and meaning networks to guide instructional decisions.

Using this tool, instructors can simultaneously attend to the words worth teaching along with the ways in which they can teach their meanings most effectively. By so doing, the vocabulary learning process has the potential to expand and deepen exponentially.

References

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