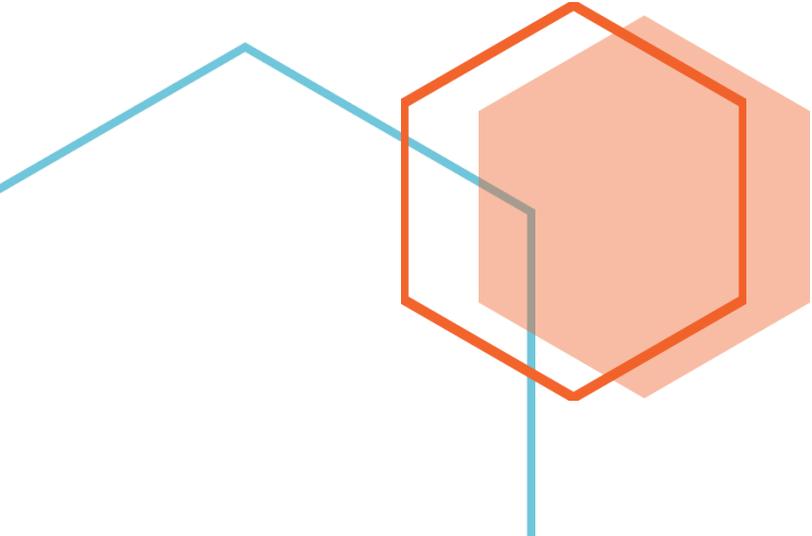




Vocabulary and Your Subject

Why and how teachers should explicitly teach vocabulary.

The 'word gap' describes the vast differences between students with an extensive and those with a limited vocabulary. This gap will not close without teachers acting to explicitly address this. Limited vocabulary is the main reason for students under-achieving in your subject.



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What is the Word Gap?

The term 'word gap' describes the vast differences between students with regard to the number of words they know and use i.e. their vocabulary. Vocabulary is important as it determines how well students think, speak, read, write and comprehend (Mary Myatt, 2018).

Why build vocabulary?

Mary Myatt, in her recent book 'The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to coherence', identifies three reasons for deliberately building vocabulary:

1. To close the word gap
2. To deepen and extend knowledge
3. To give students the joy of words well-used

In our subject teaching, word-rich students will be able to understand what is taught, whilst word-poor students will fall further behind (known as the Matthew Effect, a term coined by Daniel Rigney). For example, it is estimated that if a student understands 95% of the words in a text s/he will decode the rest and comprehend what is written, whereas if s/he understands less than 90% it is unlikely that the text will make much sense (David Didau). Vocabulary is therefore a pre-requisite to being able to access the curriculum.

The 'three tier' model

Vocabulary can be divided in to three tiers (Beck, McKeown & Kucan):

- Tier 1: The approx. 5500 high frequency words in common daily use.
- Tier 2: General academic words essential to reading comprehension.
- Tier 3: Subject specific words.

Teachers should focus on the words that you see often in books, but hear rarely in speech (e.g. derive, evoke, surreptitious, eradicate).

My Contention



Much has been written about how to extend students' vocabulary. I advocate that classroom teachers:

- Identify the **subject specific vocabulary** essential to the curriculum
- **Explicitly teach** this vocabulary
- **Require students to use it** verbally and in writing
- Frequently **revisit it**
- **Promote retrieval** through low stakes testing
- Make time for students to **read in class.**

Explicit teaching of vocabulary is essential if students are to understand your subject, and to enable the word-poor to catch up with their peers.



Explicit vocabulary teaching

Some students will pick up your use of new words and assimilate this in to their vocabulary quite easily. However, for some students the words will slip past them like small fish through the holes in a net. These students will need explicit teaching of vocabulary.

Explicit teaching means identifying the important vocabulary, explaining it clearly, giving multiple examples of the word's usage in different contexts and providing students with opportunities to practice its use (verbally and in writing).

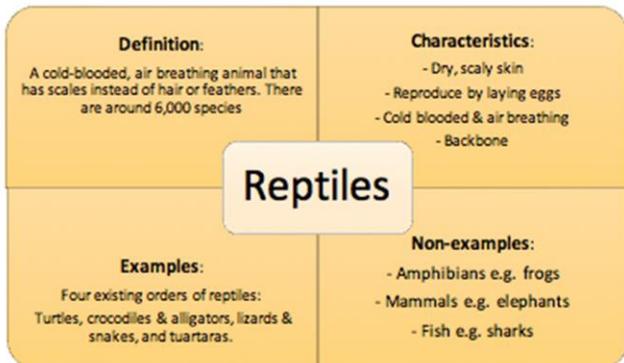
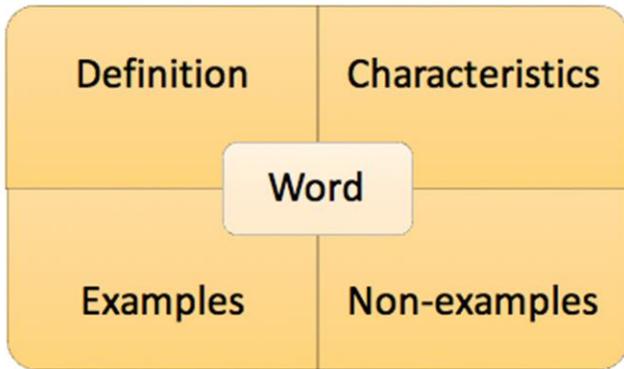
Dictionary definitions are not always sufficiently clear, specific and/or detailed. Mary Myatt provides the following example:

The word 'Illusion' is defined in a dictionary as "Appearance or feeling that misleads because it is not real".

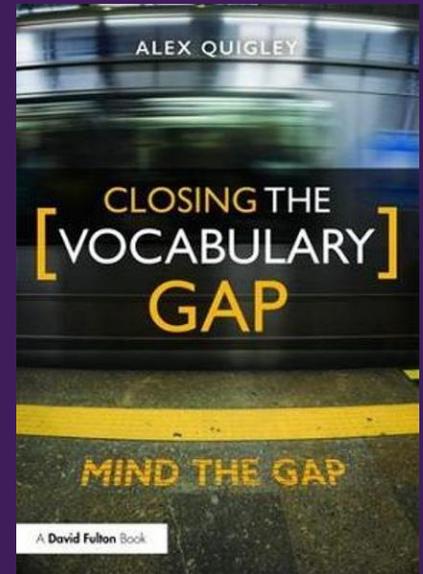
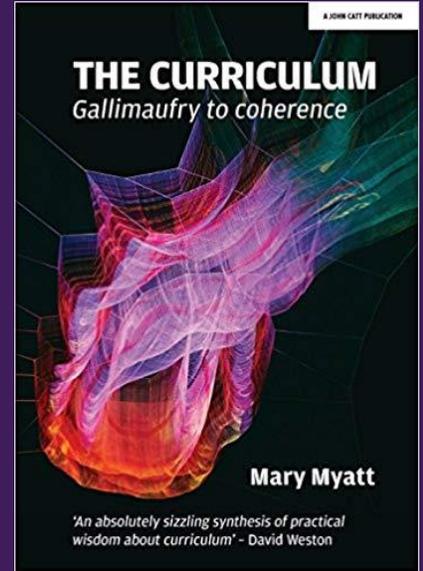
She suggests a better definition as "Something that looks like one thing but is really something else or is not there at all".

The Frayer Model

A well-used graphic approach to explicitly teaching vocabulary was developed by Dorothy Frayer at the University of Wisconsin.



Recommended books



www.theconfidentteacher.com

Alex Quigley's website is a good source of ideas and resources.



Etymology (the origins of words)

All words derive from somewhere – words have roots. Linking words to their roots helps build connections and supports long term memory. Subject specific words are often conceptual 'baskets' which contain the small details of knowledge which deepen students' understanding. Language and knowledge are intertwined.

Exploring a words roots can also link subject disciplines and helps students when they encounter vocabulary elsewhere. For example, the Greek word 'isos' (meaning 'equal') may be learnt in Maths in relation to triangles (isosceles) but help students understand the meaning of the terms related to measuring climatic conditions, such as 'isobar' and 'isometric'.

Etymology can also help students with spelling as they break words down in to their component parts (morphology). Sometimes there are stories behind the origin of words which aid memory. Alex Quigley gives the example of the word 'ghost' which students often spell without the 'h'. The inclusion of the 'h' is due to a mistake made 500 years ago by a Flemish printing press assistant. Stories like this act as an aide memoire – they make knowledge sticky.

A useful website for etymology is www.Etymonline.com which can be used by teachers or students to check the origin of a word. This makes a good homework task.

Speaking

Language teachers are experts in developing vocabulary. They know that you cannot learn vocabulary unless you practice out loud. You need to say the word repeatedly. This helps students learn how to pronounce the word, which means they think about how it is spelt and constructed. It also helps fix the word in long term memory. You will often hear students in language classes all reciting the word repeatedly. Why do only language teachers do this?

Vocabulary needs to be used correctly. Asking students to use new words in a sentence helps them establish the meaning, and for the teacher to check they understand. How students answer questions verbally is also important. We should insist on students using the subject-specific vocabulary in their answers.

Asking students to speak also means asking others to listen. Listening also strengthens vocabulary. We can ask students to improve on the answers given by others by using more precise language and specialist vocabulary.

In subjects other than languages, we often leap straight to writing. This disadvantages the word-poor who cannot as easily assimilate new words in to their vocabulary schema (mental word map). Speaking is the gateway to writing and remembering.

Further reading

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. "Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge – of Words and the World"

https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/AE_SPRNG.pdf



Diagnostic assessment

Do you know which students are word-rich and word-poor in your subject? When starting a topic, how do you ascertain whether students have the relevant subject-specific vocabulary? How do you check understanding of vocabulary of the whole class? By weaving vocabulary in to your usual diagnostic assessment approach it need not become 'another thing to fit in'.

Summative assessments

Vocabulary can be woven in to assessments. Multiple-choice questions and gap-fill tasks help to test word selection and whether students understand broad meaning. Asking students to explain the meaning of terms is also useful. Mark schemes can award credit for the use of the correct, specialist vocabulary in extended writing.

Conclusions

Students must understand what they hear and read if they are to learn. Unless we address the limited vocabulary some students possess, our impact as a teacher will be limited. Expanding a student's vocabulary will enable them to increase their knowledge and 'do well' in our subject. The explicit teaching of vocabulary will most help those who are word-poor. Explicit teaching means teachers must identify key vocabulary, take the time to explain its meaning and require students to practise its use. It is within our power to close the word-gap, and in doing so close the achievement gap for word-poor students.

References

Myatt, M., *The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to coherence*, John Catt Educational Ltd, 2018
Quigley, A., *Closing the Vocabulary Gap*, Routledge, 2018

Useful websites

Alex Quigley <https://www.theconfidentteacher.com/>

David Didau <https://learningspy.co.uk/>

Mary Myatt <http://www.marymyatt.com/>

Greg Ashman <https://gregashman.wordpress.com/>

Etymology www.Etymonline.com

Word sift www.WordSift.org

Vocabulary lists www.Vocabulary.com

Doug Lemov on explicit instruction <http://teachlikeachamion.comblog/active-practice-key-vocabulary/>