

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Explicit Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Mary E. Curtis, Ph.D. • January 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Vocabulary Instruction

### Highlights

- Explicit vocabulary instruction is important for adolescent students because of the interrelationship between vocabulary and comprehension; vocabulary is a strong predictor of how well a student will comprehend.
- Dr. Curtis discusses principles of vocabulary instruction supported by research, such as direct and explicit instruction, multiple opportunities to learn word meanings and vocabulary skills in varied contexts, and active and generative tasks that provide opportunities for students to practice, including discussions, writing activities, and graphic organizers.
- There are different types of vocabulary that students must learn. Dr. Curtis distinguishes between conversational vocabulary that is oral and used on an everyday basis and academic vocabulary that is written and learned through schooling.
- Content area teachers can help students understand the meanings of words by teaching students how to use context clues; focusing on root words, prefixes, and suffixes; providing graphic organizers to show students how concepts they are working on are related to concepts they already know; and actively engaging students with words and meanings.

## About the Interviewee

Mary E. Curtis is Professor of Education and founding director of the Center for Special Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. Before coming to Lesley in 1999, she directed the Boys Town Reading Center, where she oversaw research and development on Reading Is FAME®, a remedial reading curriculum shown to reverse reading failure in older adolescents.

Mary Beth is the lead author of the Tool Kit for the Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) project, a professional development initiative of the US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Currently she oversees program evaluation and certification activities for the National STAR Training Network.

Mary Beth is the author of numerous articles on reading diagnosis and remediation, the role of vocabulary in comprehension, and the reading skills of at-risk teens and adults. She is a member of the Adult Literacy Research Working Group, and was Lesley's principal investigator on a research project for improving the instruction of adult basic education intermediate readers, conducted in collaboration with Harvard University and Soliloquy Learning and funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education.

Mary Beth has been an advisor to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for Family Literacy, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the Massachusetts Department of Education. She is also a member of the Editorial Review Board for Reading Research Quarterly.

Mary Beth earned her Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, and she has been an Associate Professor of Education at Harvard University, Associate Director of the Harvard Reading Laboratory, and a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Learning Research and Development Center (Pittsburgh, PA).

## Full Transcript

My name is Mary Beth Curtis. I'm a Professor of Education here at Lesley University, where I also direct the Center for Special Education. For the past 30 years or so, my research and clinical work has focused on how reading develops and what fails to develop or develops differently when students have difficulty with reading. And over the past couple of years, I've been working with students who are at risk for reading failure and, as a consequence, at risk for dropping out of school. And in looking at those students and trying to figure out what sorts of things they were good at and what sorts of things they were having difficulty with, we were struck in our testing by how many of those students had difficulty in vocabulary.

When we think about why explicit vocabulary instruction is important for adolescence and important for teachers of students of adolescence, whether they be English Language Arts teachers or content area

teachers, I always go back to the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension.

Vocabulary is also a consequence of how well you comprehend. If you're a good comprehender, you're going to have lots of opportunities to learn new word meanings from context. But if you're having difficulty in comprehending, you're going to have a really hard time learning those word meanings on your own.

Direct and explicit vocabulary instruction is certainly the first principle that the research supports. It's particularly important when you're working with students who are learning new vocabulary that they have the opportunity to have the information explained to them directly, to have opportunities then to apply that information guided by their teachers, and then finally opportunities to apply it independently. Another principle that we want to make sure that we incorporate in our vocabulary instruction is multiple opportunities to learn the new word meanings or the vocabulary skills that we're teaching. In addition to these multiple encounters, we want to make sure that these multiple encounters are occurring in varied contexts. An example I can think of is a student, I asked him if he knew what "desist" meant, and he said, "Yeah." He said, "My high school teacher says that, 'cease and desist.'" And I said then, "Okay, what does it mean?" He says, "Well, I think it means sit down, shut up, and pay attention."

Then finally, in addition to direct and explicit instruction, multiple opportunities in varied contexts, we want to make sure that the tasks that we give students to learn vocabulary with and vocabulary skills are very active and generative tasks—that they really have a chance to work with the information, that they're not just sitting there and receiving it as empty vessels, but they have a chance to work with it. And so ways that we can help students to work with this information include discussions, include writing activities, include graphic organizers when they're filling out the information. The key to it is to make sure that there are many right answers, that students know that there is no one way to respond in these tasks. And the research supports that as being a very effective way to teach vocabulary.

When we think about why it's important for subject area teachers to provide explicit vocabulary instruction, it often helps to think about the kinds of vocabulary words that are out there. Researchers often distinguish between conversational vocabulary and academic vocabulary. Conversational vocabulary is oral vocabulary. It's the kinds of things that refer to concrete things out there that we discuss on an everyday basis. Academic vocabulary is written vocabulary. It's vocabulary that we learn through schooling, and it's the kind of thing that content area teachers have to teach when they teach their areas, and it tends to be more abstract than conversational vocabulary.

Academic vocabulary, really, we can think of as two different kinds as well. There are these words that people have called brick words and there are words that they've called mortar words. And the brick words are the key concepts in the academic area. So, if we were teaching the different kinds of muscles or something like that, there would be skeletal muscles; there would be cardiac muscles; there would be smooth muscles. Those are really the brick vocabulary words when you are thinking about muscles. But there are also these mortar words that you have to know in order to understand the brick words. So, if I was talking about muscles, I would need to know words like "functions" because those different muscles have

different functions. I would need to know the word “characteristics” because those muscles have different characteristics.

The researchers Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown have brought all of those notions together when they’ve talked about word tiers. They talked about three different word tiers. And tier one are these words that are basic vocabulary words. They’re words that occur in oral language, and they tend to be words that most middle school and high school students know the meanings of. They’re words like “baby,” and “store,” and “bus,” and “car,” and things like that. And then, there are these tier three words at the very opposite end. And the tier three words are the domain-specific words. Those are the ones that content area teachers want to teach; that’s their content. They’re things like “isotope,” and “peninsula,” and “quadratic,” and those sorts of words. And then, in the middle there are these tier two words. And these tier two words are academic words, but they cut across the content areas. They’re common to all those areas. And they’re words like “characteristic,” and “analyze,” and “formulate,” and things like that. Content area teachers, as I said, teach those tier three words, that’s their content. But if students don’t know these tier two words to kind of tie the content together, students are going to have difficulty in understanding the content. So, that’s why it’s so important that content area teachers, as well as English Language Arts teachers, focus on teaching tier two and, if necessary, the tier one words so that students will then be able to understand the tier three words.

When content area teachers are thinking about the ways in which they can help students understand the words not only that are part of the content but those vocabulary words that bind together the content, these tier two words that help students to understand their content, there’s a number of things they can do. Teaching prefixes and suffixes and root words can be a wonderful way for content area teachers to help students. So many of the words in the content area come from Latin and Greek origins, and so it can be especially helpful to teach those within the content areas because that’s where those words are occurring. Also, graphic organizers are a terrific way to help students in the content areas to understand, and showing students how the concepts that they are working on relate to concepts that are already familiar to them.

There are so many words; we can only teach so many of them. There are so many skills. We can’t teach them all, but we can get students engaged with words and meanings and to raise their consciousness about it. I was made particularly aware of this just a few days ago. Some students were in a vocabulary class, and the teacher said, “We decided to take the day off and to watch the inauguration of the President.” And so, the teacher and students watched the inauguration of President Obama, and the students got increasingly excited as they listened to the inauguration speech. And at the end of it, the teacher said, “Well, what did you think?” And the student said, “I can’t believe it!” They were so excited. President Obama had used three of their vocabulary words in the inaugural address. Now, how cool is that!