Flooding Students with New Vocabulary

Summary: Vocabulary is often taught in small chunks at a time. However, research suggests that when taught in coordinated, effective ways, students can be exposed to huge swaths of vocabulary and both learn and retain the words. In an article for *The Reading Teacher*, a group of university professors and a classroom teacher lay out how this can work.

Practical Applications

The authors note three overarching principles of effective "vocabulary floods":

- The vocabulary words are **organized into major clusters** that "integrate and teach meaning relationships among known words and new words simultaneously." (e.g. "furniture," or "sizes"; they reference the cluster structure developed by Dr. Robert Marzano, follow this link for more information [pdf])
- **Repetition** occurs regularly, giving students multiple opportunities to engage with the words and word clusters in different ways
- There is **meaningful use** of the words "by having students verbally, visually, and physically explore degrees of word meaning, multiple meanings, and connections among words and concepts they represent in their own reading and writing."

There are some important ways to ensure you are teaching words in clusters effectively:
- Select texts to use in class that focus on one of the clusters – for instance, "No More Jumping on the Bed!" is full of words about "noises," one of the clusters. Internet searches can help you find good books that focus on particular topics.
- Use "concept eggs" – essentially, an oval with a starting word in the middle (like "big") which is filled out with related words (like "enormous" or "massive") surrounding it. As you read through different texts focusing on a cluster, students will find new words to add to the egg.
- Help students learn the over-arching cluster concept term for a set of words they may know; for instance, that "chair" and "bed" are all examples of the vocab term "furniture"
- Teach new meanings for known words by using graphic organizers; so, by pulling out all the different meanings of the word "light," (e.g. "ignite," "illuminate"), you can teach a flood of vocabulary words that students already have an anchor for.
- Clarify and extend the meaning of new words by helping students see the different degrees of meaning – so, for the word "angry," with a graphic organizer that has different levels along the top (e.g. "just a little," "definitely," "extremely"), students can pull out new vocabulary words (e.g. "peeved," "furious," "incensed").

Conclusion and Citation

If vocabulary words are taught through clusters of meaning and also by anchoring a flood of new words to pre-existing knowledge, students can learn a huge number of vocabulary terms in a much shorter period of time than is usually thought.

Brabham,E., et. al. "Flooding Vocabulary Gaps to Accelerate Word Learning." *The Reading Teacher (*May 2012), pp. 523-533. http://bit.ly/KU4tcr (subscription only).