

Vocabulary Matters: The Role of Core Vocabulary in Complex Text

Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert, September 2014

Why is core vocabulary important?

In explaining why core vocabulary is essential to reading more complex text, Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert first defines the term core vocabulary. In her research, Dr. Hiebert has found that 2500 complex word families account for 90% of the words in text. These 2500 complex word families are what she calls the core vocabulary. It is proficiency with these 2500 complex word families that will help a reader read more complex text.

What are the features of words in core vocabulary?

Research has shown that at about third grade students can recognize lots of words, but they do so very slowly. This lack of fluency hinders their comprehension of the texts, complex or not. Students with proficiency in recognizing and understanding the meaning of core vocabulary words will be able to read more fluently and also concentrate on the ideas within the text.

Dr. Hiebert finds that the words in core vocabulary fall into four groups

- concrete picturable words (21% of core vocabulary)
- academic words (18% of core vocabulary)
- morphological word families (When expanded, the 2500 complex word families, accounts for about 12,000 words seen in most texts.)
- polysemous words

How do teachers and programs support students' facility with the core vocabulary?

With a set of words that are critical to being able to read proficiently, the instinctive thing to do is to focus on the words and use word lists or flashcards to learn the words in the core vocabulary. But this is NOT what Dr. Hiebert suggests. The words in the core

vocabulary are too multifaceted to learn using word lists and flashcards. Instead, she suggests utilizing these four techniques.

- For the words that are concrete, that is to say they are picturable, use pictures to quickly convey meaning.
- Teach words of the same idea together by using word maps. Link word maps together so students can learn words in the context of an idea or content area.
- Teach words of the same morphological family together to show how the meaning of a word can change subtly or drastically as it shifts from a verb to a noun.
- Read, read, read lots of text that include the core vocabulary in supportive manner so that students can gain automaticity in reading the words from the core vocabulary.

For more details and further examples of Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert's research on Core Vocabulary, please visit TextProject.org:

<http://textproject.org/archive/webinars/vocabulary-matters/>