

Vocabulary Instruction: Possible Sentences for English Language Arts

Est. Time: 1 Hour

Objective

Learn about and discuss a strategy for improving vocabulary instruction in English language arts.

Overview

Vocabulary instruction is an integral part of helping secondary students to learn content successfully. The use of vocabulary instructional activities, such as Possible Sentences, prior to reading text is intended to help students activate their background knowledge, think about words as related concepts, and actively process information. A study in which Possible Sentences was implemented with academic text found that students who engaged in the structured form of pre-teaching vocabulary showed improved vocabulary recall as well as improved recall of facts from the text. Possible Sentences requires that students read texts of sufficient length and content to warrant teaching 6–8 new vocabulary words and reviewing another 4–6 familiar words. Following are the steps to implement Possible Sentences with fidelity.

Because Possible Sentences requires that students read texts of sufficient length, it works well for English language arts; however, it is not appropriate for some content areas, such as mathematics, or with certain lessons or content such as poetry.

- 1. Teacher:** Select unfamiliar and familiar words.
 - Teacher selects 6–8 important, unfamiliar words and generates simplified definitions for each word.
 - Teacher selects 4–6 related, known words.
- 2. Teacher and students:** Practice word identification.
 - Teacher presents the unfamiliar and familiar words as one list.
 - Teacher pronounces each term.
 - Students pronounce each term in unison.
- 3. Teacher and students:** Generate student-friendly definitions.
 - Students define terms.
 - Teacher provides student-friendly definitions for the remaining words.
- 4. Students:** Compose Possible Sentences.
 - Students write 2–4 sentences containing at least two vocabulary words each that they feel comfortable using.
 - Students share Possible Sentences with the class.
- 5. Students:** Read text.
 - Students read the target passage independently, aloud with partners or in small groups, or aloud as a class.

Vocabulary Instruction: Possible Sentences for English Language Arts

6. **Students:** Evaluate, discuss, and revise sentences.

- Students check to make sure that their sentences are consistent with the information and message conveyed in the text.
- Students revise possible sentences after reading the text as needed. *Note: The teacher may need to model making modifications or additions to the possible sentences.*

Students with limited vocabulary knowledge not only know fewer words than their peers with typical vocabulary development but also often know less about the meanings of individual words. This makes it important to consider the multiple meanings of target words and words that sound similar to discipline-specific vocabulary when planning instruction. New words with similar forms and pronunciations should not be taught simultaneously. However, teachers can avoid confusion by pointing out what distinguishes a new vocabulary word from any similar-sounding words students already know or what distinguishes a content-specific definition from the meaning students might already be using for a word with the same spelling.

Because the range in students' reading abilities tends to widen as students enter the middle grades, there is an increased need for teachers to differentiate instruction and create appropriately challenging learning opportunities for all students. Teachers can differentiate Possible Sentences in the following ways:

- Before reading: Provide sentence stems to students who are struggling or additional "challenge words" for students who are more advanced.
- After reading: Focus students' attention on particular sentences needing revision or require revisions to include different forms of the target word(s).

Keep In Mind

- Any new instructional strategy must be thoroughly explained and modeled to students.
- Teachers should spend time preparing all parts of the activity (e.g., defining the words, writing sentences using all the words) before implementing a lesson in the classroom.
- Learning vocabulary is an iterative process requiring multiple opportunities for students to experience and practice applying a new word before they will do so with expertise.
- Because students benefit from hearing what their peers know about vocabulary words and how their peers can apply their words, including opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction or class discussions can promote learning.
- At some point after the Possible Sentences activity, the teacher should evaluate the students' knowledge of the new vocabulary terms.

Vocabulary Instruction: Possible Sentences for English Language Arts

Scenario

Ms. Burton is prepared to introduce her students to the short story “Raymond’s Run” by Toni Cade Bambara. She has previewed the text and chosen six unfamiliar words (left column) that are critically important to understanding the lesson. She has also chosen four related words (right column) that the students already know. All 10 words are displayed on the board.

hustle	mind
tale	sidekick
prodigy	phony
periscope	respect
liable	
pageant	

Ms. Burton reads each word to the class and asks the students to repeat each of them. To activate her students’ prior knowledge, she asks whether they know what any of the words mean.

As Ms. Burton accepts students’ responses to her prompt, “Raise your hand if you know what any of these words mean,” she notices that Carla is struggling, offering only vague definitions. For example, Carla says that “A *pageant* is when you win a crown,” and that *respect* means “something you earn.” Carla is on the right track, but Ms. Burton wonders what she can do to help Carla deepen her understanding of the words’ meanings.

Ms. Burton also notices that a few students need to learn new definitions for words with multiple meanings such as *mind* and *tale*. For instance, a few students said that “*Mind* means the same thing as *brain*.” This is one meaning of *mind*, but Bambara’s short story uses the word as a verb meaning *to obey*.

After providing a simplified definition for each of the words and generating possible sentences, Ms. Burton asks her students to read the short story with a partner. The class is now working in pairs to review and revise their possible sentences. Meanwhile, Ms. Burton circulates the classroom, offering help to the pairs as needed.

She notices that Sarah and Annie have finished revising their sentences and are simply talking with one another. She looks over their work and sees that they have successfully revised the Possible Sentences and seem to have a strong grasp of the words they are studying. She wonders how she can provide enrichment for Sarah and Annie while the rest of the class continues with the regular lesson.

Questions

1. How would you encourage Carla to deepen her understanding of the words’ meanings?
2. How would you provide instruction on multiple meaning words to students who seem confused by their use in the new context?
3. How would you provide enrichment for Sarah and Annie?

Vocabulary Instruction: Possible Sentences for English Language Arts

Resources

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