



## Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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### Vocabulary Acquisition

From Helping Middle and High School Readers

Vocabulary acquisition depends heavily on students' prior or background knowledge. It requires them to use information and knowledge that they already possess to aid them in figuring out or learning new and unfamiliar words.

For example, the word "page" in the following sentence might confuse some students who have no background knowledge of British royalty:

The Queen's page had been a loyal member of the royal Court for more than 30 years.

Students must cope with words that are technical and content specific in the classes each day.

It is not feasible or productive to ask students to memorize large numbers of new terms on a regular basis. As a result, we as teachers must help students to develop strategies that will help them deal with unfamiliar, content-specific, or technical vocabulary they encounter. Using a dictionary to check on the meaning of each new word they meet will not necessarily solve the problem. Dictionaries contain many meanings for even common words; picking the right meaning often amounts to mere guess work by the student.

In 1971, Dale and O'Rourke described the four stages of word knowledge;

1. I never saw this word before.
2. I have heard of it, but I do not know what it means.
3. I recognize it in context; it has something to do with ---.
4. I know it.

The comprehension or understanding of the meaning of the word includes knowing or being able to make connections with prior associations, attributes, and experiences connect with the idea, a task that some students do much better than others.

### Improving the Teaching of Vocabulary Skills

The following instructional strategies are effective in helping students to develop vocabulary acquisition skills.

- Introduce key vocabulary related to content-area specific concepts.
- Activate students' prior knowledge.
- Examine relationships among the words to form categories to help students make connections.
- Point out root words, prefixes, and suffixes.
- Provide direct instruction on selected words.
- Model a think-aloud process for students.
- Utilize graphic organizers to help students connect to prior knowledge and organize their thinking process when learning new and unfamiliar words.
- Use a word map.
- Encourage and guide students to create their own vocabulary lists.
- Link and integrate new and unfamiliar words to existing knowledge of words.
- Consider any academic, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds of students that may affect content priorities in relationship to word meanings.
- Utilize organizational patterns in text (text structure) that may help students with their vocabulary acquisition.
- Determine expectations for students' learning in relation to word meaning skills.
- Develop instructional strategies to link word meaning with metacognition, prior knowledge, inferencing, and text structure strategies.
- Select critical strategies and develop a plan to link vocabulary and other content areas.
- Select appropriate graphic organizers to reinforce learning.