

TEACHING VOCABULARY TERMS AND PHRASES

The topic “vocabulary terms and phrases” is one of the major categories of instructional content in any subject-matter area. In career areas, we often use the word “jargon” to describe the technical terminology of a specific field or interest area. Think about the amount of “jargon” your field contains and how difficult communication might be for people who do not speak your language. Your students most likely fall into this category when they first enter your classroom. They probably don’t know key technical terms or the specialized vocabulary that will help them communicate and demonstrate credibility with co-workers when they start getting jobs.

It’s important to note that research indicates a strong, direct relationship with vocabulary and intelligence, the ability to understand new information, and a person’s level of income. Teaching vocabulary to your students does not guarantee that they will all be considered brilliant or wealthy in the future. But, using the strategy certainly does improve your students’ chances for success.

Some studies indicate that vocabulary instruction is one of the most important instructional practices teachers can use in the classroom, especially with low-achieving students. Furthermore, research findings indicate that teaching vocabulary increases the likelihood that students will understand the words when they read them later.

Vocabulary instruction is important across all grade levels, with the most significant achievement gains occurring among high school students. By incorporating a very simple strategy into daily lessons, CTE teachers have a golden opportunity to directly impact students’ futures.

Here are some general guidelines for teaching vocabulary in the high school classroom. One, make sure the terms being taught relate to the lesson being covered. Teaching vocabulary not related to the lesson will help students to a certain degree; however, the best way to teach vocabulary is to teach words that you know the students will come across very soon in their learning. Teaching vocabulary should be intentional.

Guideline two, select a limited number of the really important terms (no more than 10-15) for any lesson. Too many words in a vocabulary list may overwhelm students and stifle or prevent learning.

Guideline three, define the terms at some point in the lesson. It is considered an acceptable practice to have students generate definitions to new words on their own or in small groups; but, at some point, students need to receive authoritative feedback from you on the accuracy of their definitions. You’ve

heard the saying “practice makes perfect”? Well, if you keep practicing the wrong thing, you’ll learn the wrong thing. The saying is much better this way: “perfect practice makes perfect.” So, let your students know if they are practicing the right thing or not.

Lastly, use pictures to help students understand the definitions of new words. Many students rely on words to learn, but others need a visual image to understand the terms. So, either provide a picture or require students to generate their own picture to describe each word.

One method for teaching vocabulary is to use the following step-by-step process for each vocabulary word.

- STEP 1: Give students a brief definition (in words) at or near the beginning of the lesson.
- STEP 2: Show students a picture that illustrates the definition.
- STEP 3: During instruction, have students come up with a unique definition.
- STEP 4: Have students draw a unique picture to illustrate their definition.
- STEP 5 occurs throughout the lesson. This step checks the students’ word understanding for accuracy. This can be done in a variety of ways – one-on-one verbal interaction with you, peer discussion and review, grading the definitions and drawings, giving a quiz, or requiring students to use the words as part of a presentation. Consider using a variety of strategies to check student understanding. Ultimately, you determine the best way to evaluate your students, but make sure you do evaluate them!

The resources include examples of handouts that have been used when teaching vocabulary to high school students. Notice that each example has a visual element as well as a text element. At the top of each example is a brief description of how the handout was used in the classroom. Hopefully, this will give you some ideas as you incorporate vocabulary teaching into your lessons.

If you need help getting started developing vocabulary materials, the resources also include a blank template you can copy and use with your students. There is space for the word, the definition, and a visual image in the template. Students can create this document independently or in groups, or you can create the document and hand it out to them to refer to during the lesson. However you choose to use the template, make sure all elements are included for each vocabulary word.

TRANSCRIPT

Finally, if you are interested in learning more about this topic, check out the book *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement* by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack. This reference is particularly helpful in understanding how to best teach vocabulary in the classroom.