

A “Word” About Vocabulary

This *Considerations Packet* addresses important decisions teachers make as they plan meaningful vocabulary instruction for struggling learners. The considerations include selecting vocabulary and determining appropriate goals for instruction of specific terms. In addition, general guidelines for teaching vocabulary and a variety of instructional strategies are offered.

Students who struggle to acquire new vocabulary may have generalized linguistic deficiencies, memory deficits, poor word learning strategies, or any combination of the three (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995). These students typically require more explicit instruction and intensive practice in order to master key vocabulary. Effective strategies for learning vocabulary help students understand and learn new words, make sense of new vocabulary by integrating it with what they already know, and remember the meaning of words when encountered at a later date or in new material. This packet provides specific strategies for teaching and learning vocabulary.

Selecting Vocabulary

Understanding the nature of vocabulary is important to the process of selecting appropriate instructional strategies that enable students to master the vocabulary they need to learn to read and to read to learn. Vocabulary consists of *function* words and *content* words. Function words are common words, such as *are*, *that*, and *to*. Content words include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, like *flower*, *eat*, *beautiful*, and *sadly*. Further, content words are comprised of both *concrete* and *abstract* words. Concrete words, such as *automobile*, can be taught using an object or showing a picture. Abstract words, like *harmony*, are more easily taught using examples and nonexamples. Finally, words may be considered to belong to either *general* vocabulary or *technical* vocabulary. General vocabulary refers to words, such as *giant*, that are not directly associated with a particular content area, while technical vocabulary, like *mitosis*, is associated with a specific content area, subject, or topic.

The first step in planning for vocabulary instruction is to identify the words students will learn. Suggestions to guide you in this decision-making process are enumerated below.

- **Select words that are common or generally useful for students to know.** Select words that students will encounter frequently, and that therefore, represent common knowledge (Marinak, Moore, Henk, & Keepers, 1997).
- **Avoid assigning words that students rarely encounter** (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000). Less is more.
- **Choose terms that are strategic to academic success and are not typically acquired independently** (Baker, et al., 1995). Emphasize terms critical to the student’s understanding of the reading passage or unit of study, such as terms identified as “essential knowledge” in Virginia’s Standards of Learning teacher resource guides.

- **Identify words that are essential for understanding a reading selection.** Ask, “If readers did not know the meaning of this word, would they still be able to understand the passage?” If the answer is ‘Yes’, the word is probably not essential to understanding the selection’s major concepts or ideas” (Marinak, et al., 1997, p. 1).
- **Pick textbook vocabulary that addresses key concepts or ideas.** Each chapter of a subject area text may include a list of 15-20 vocabulary words. Often, only four or five of these terms address critical concepts of the chapter (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000).

Selecting Goals for Vocabulary Instruction

The second step in planning for vocabulary instruction is to determine the depth to which students will be required to understand each term you have selected. Some words warrant only a *minimum level of knowledge*, that is, a level of understanding that calls upon students to associate a new word with a definition, synonym, or context. However, if comprehension of the term is required, the teacher must select instructional strategies that enable students to categorize words, complete sentences, or generate multiple meanings for words. Finally, when academic demands require a *deep level of understanding* of terms, it is important that students be able to create original sentences using the words, make connections between new and prior knowledge, and apply word meanings across contexts (Baker et al., 1995).

General Guidelines for Teaching Vocabulary

It is helpful to keep in mind several general principles that facilitate acquisition of new vocabulary.

- **Teach new words in the context of a meaningful subject-matter lesson and facilitate student discussion that requires students to use the new word** (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000).
- **Ensure that students hear the correct pronunciation of the word and practice saying it aloud.** Hearing the syllable structure and stress pattern of the word facilitates its storage in memory (Fay & Culter, 1977).
- **Teach word parts – root words, base words, prefixes, and suffixes that students will encounter frequently** (Jones, 1999).
- **Teach words in related clusters to help students understand how words are related and interrelated** (Marinak, et al., 1997).
- **Identify examples/applications and nonexamples/nonapplications related to the meaning of the new word** (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000).
- **Help students connect new vocabulary to something with which they are already familiar** (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000).

- **Create opportunities for students to paraphrase the definition of a new term so that they can identify the main idea associated with the term and recognize specific bits of information that clarify its broader, more general core idea** (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000).
- **Offer students the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary using a variety of learning modalities or formats that actively engage them in the learning process** (Ellis & Farmer, 1996-2000).

Activities for Teaching Vocabulary

After you have strategically selected vocabulary words for instruction and determined the appropriate instructional goals for chosen terms, it is time to identify instructional strategies that align with these goals. The activities suggested below employ a variety of formats to address the goals of vocabulary instruction.

Same Word, Different Subject (Marinak et al., 1997)

1. Explain to students that each school subject consists of technical vocabulary words and specialized words. Technical words are those that usually have only one meaning and are discussed in only one subject. For example:

English – verb, gerund	biology – mitosis	mathematics – rhombus
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2. Tell students that specialized vocabulary words are those that are used in different subjects and usually have different meanings in each subject. For example, the word *division* could be used differently in history, mathematics, and science classes.
3. Have students identify and discuss other specialized vocabulary words. Create a class list that can be added to regularly as new words are encountered and discussed.

Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (adapted from Haggard, 1982)

1. Ask students to identify two words they believe everyone should learn that are related to specific topics the group is studying.
2. Have students write their words on the board.
3. Ask students to present their words to the group by defining them, explaining why the group should learn them, and telling where the words were found.
4. Moderate a discussion through which the class reduces the list to a predetermined number of most important words by eliminating words already known by many. The final list becomes the focus of vocabulary activities for the next few days.

Scavenger Hunt (adapted from Pages, 2000)

1. Give students a list of essential vocabulary they must know for a unit they are studying.
2. Organize students into small groups – usually three or four students per group.
3. Provide student groups with time to search for the new words using reference books, newspapers, magazines, websites, and other appropriate resources at school and at home. Instruct students to collect examples of the words, copy sentences that use the words, collect or draw pictures of the words, and build models or examples of the words. Assign point values for each of these methods of illustrating the vocabulary words, for example:

8 points for building a model representing the word

5 points for finding a newspaper/magazine article that uses the word

2 points for finding a book about the word or illustration that describes the word

You may also wish to award bonus points for groups that find a representation for all vocabulary words on the list.

4. Allow groups to meet each day for a few minutes to plan a strategy for gathering the representations of their words and assess how they are progressing in their collection efforts. Tell groups to keep their progress and findings secret; they are competing with the other groups for points.
5. Create posters on which vocabulary words are written (one word per poster). On the day that the items/examples are due, give groups a few minutes to organize their objects in piles by the words written on the posters. Show each word poster and have students, group by group, share what they have brought to represent that word. Briefly record their ideas on each word poster. Post these posters on the wall.
6. Next, have groups sort their items by type. For example, put books about the topics in one pile, pictures in another pile, and models in yet another pile.
7. As the unit is taught, students can refer to the posters to review these essential vocabulary words. The teacher may also ask students to use the list of scavenger hunt words to write a summary of the unit.

Keyword Method (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991)

Using the keyword method, the student is taught to construct a visual image that connects the vocabulary word being taught with a familiar, concrete word that is similar auditorially and shares some common feature.

1. Give students a new vocabulary word and share its meaning with them. (example: *carlin*, which means “old woman”).
2. Ask them to identify a familiar word that is acoustically similar to *carlin* (example: the keyword “car”)
3. Have students visualize or draw the image of an old woman driving a car.

When asked to recall the meaning of *carlin*, the student will retrieve *car* because of its acoustic similarity to *carlin*, and then recall the visual image of the meaning of *carlin* (example from Pressley, Levin, & McDaniel, 1987, cited in Baumann & Kameenui, 1991).

Semantic Feature Analysis (Pittelman, Heimlich, Berglund, & French, 1991)

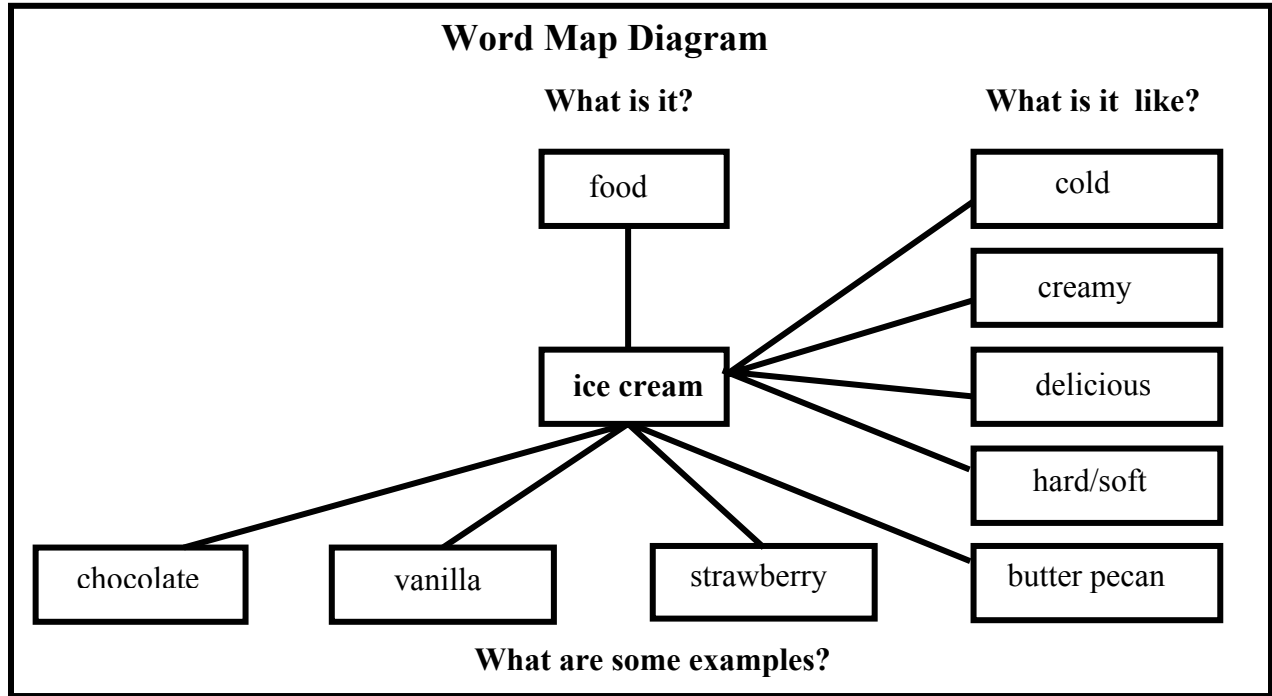
Semantic feature analysis helps students see the relationship between words within categories. It illustrates how words are both similar and different and emphasizes the uniqueness of each word.

1. Select a category topic. Begin with a category familiar to students, such as *animals*.
2. Prepare a list of concepts or objects related to the category, such as *eagle*, *dog*, *shark*, and *mouse*.
3. Determine the list of features students will explore, such as *number of legs*, *fur*, *eyes*, and *wings*.
4. Guide students through the process of completing a matrix of the information provided, using plus or minus signs to indicate whether each object possesses each feature.
5. Encourage students to add objects and features to the matrix.

Item	4 legs	2 legs	fur	eyes	wings
Eagle	-	+	-	+	+
Dog	+	-	+	+	-
Shark	-	-	-	+	-
Mouse	+	-	+	+	-

Word Map (Schwartz & Raphael, 1985; example from Holder, 1997)

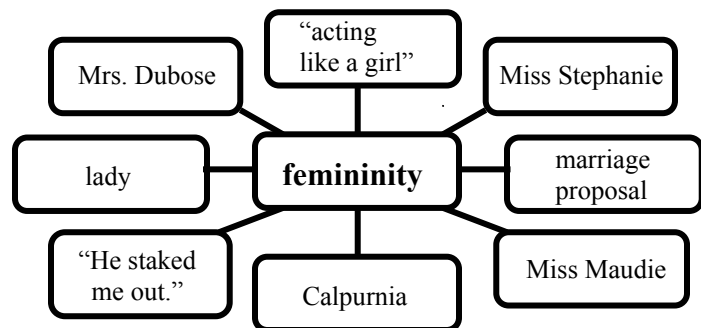
The word map technique is useful for helping students develop a general concept of *definition*. It focuses on three questions, “*What is it?*,” “*What is it like?*,” and “*What are some examples?*” to make students aware of the types of information that make up a “definition” and how that information is organized.



Word Web (adapted from Marinak et al., 1997)

1. Before reading a passage, share a list of words that students will encounter in their reading. Record these words in the center rectangles of word webs equal in number to the words on the list.
2. Pronounce each word. Encourage students to share what they think each word means.
3. Complete the word webs during reading. As students encounter a word that has been placed in the center of a word web, they record on one of the circles around each center circle words or phrases that will help them remember the meanings of the words.

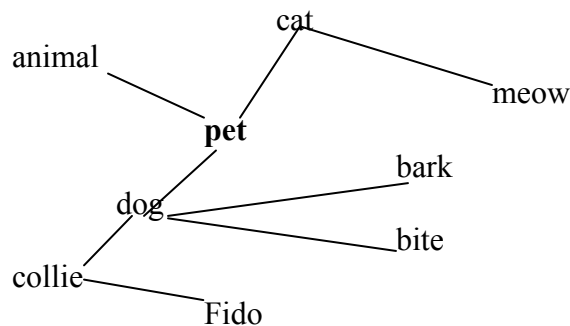
This web has been constructed to define *femininity* within the context of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



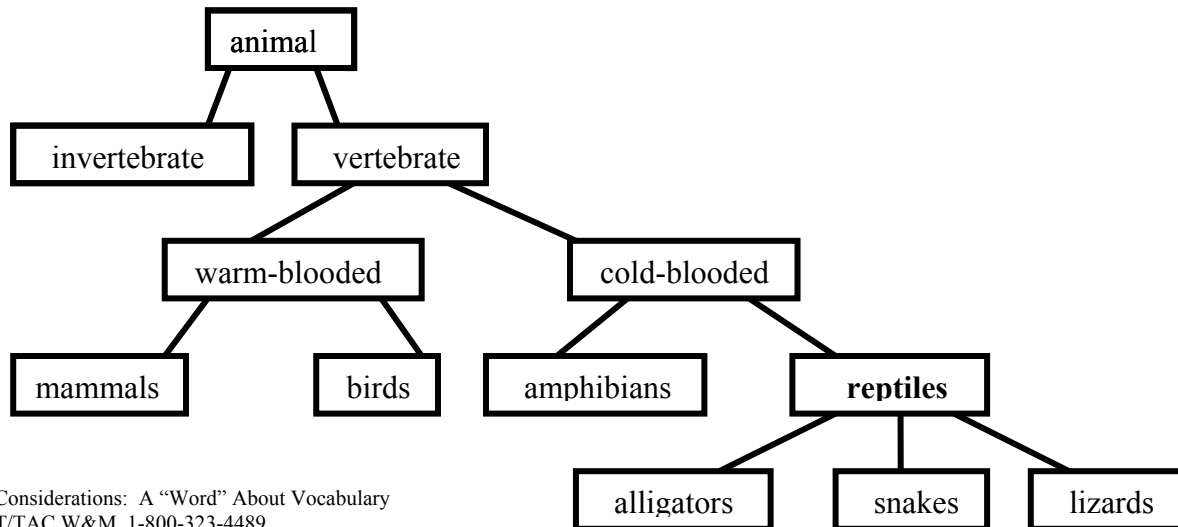
Semantic Word Map (*Building Vocabulary for Success*, 1998; adapted from Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995)

A semantic word map is a diagram of relationships between concepts and related ideas. Much of a learner’s knowledge of words and concepts can be thought of as being stored in word maps in the brain.

1. Determine a target concept that is an example of larger concepts. In the first illustration below, the key vocabulary term is *pet*.
2. Ask students to record the word for a larger group into which the word *pet* fits, in this case *animals*, and connect the two words.
3. Instruct students to write several words around the target term that are examples of it and draw a line from the key vocabulary term to each of these associated words. The words recorded in the illustration below are *dog* and *cat*.
4. Tell students to write associated words around each of the words that they have just recorded and draw connecting lines, as appropriate. In the example below students have recorded and connected three words – *bark*, *bite*, and *collie* – that they associate with *dog*. They have recorded and connected one word, *meow*, which they associate with *cat*. Allow students to continue in this manner as long as time or their skills allow. In the example below, the students additionally connected *Fido* to *collie*.



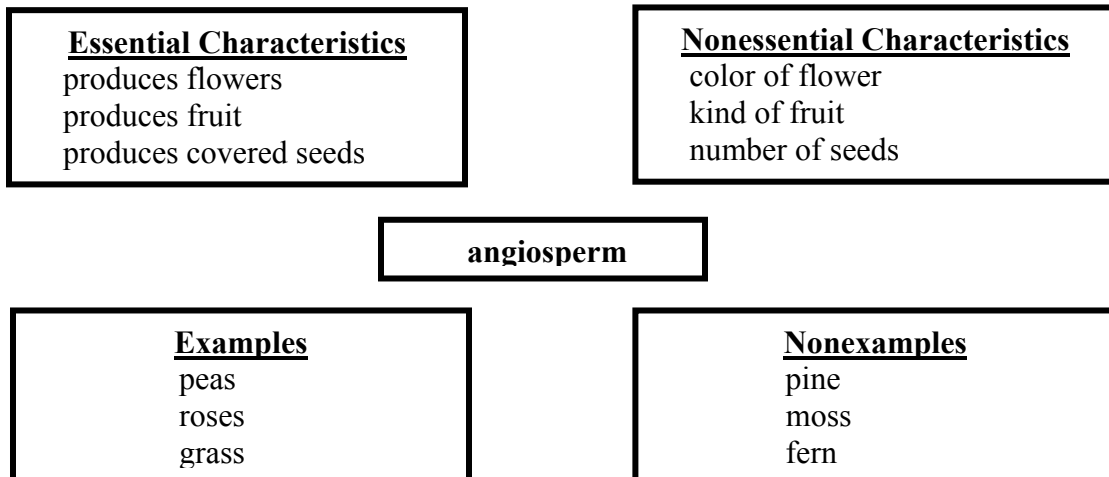
In the second illustration, the target word is *reptiles* (illustration adapted from et al., (1995).



Frayer Model (Hildroth, 1997)

This organizer helps students select and organize information related to a key concept by focusing their attention on relevant details. Students learn to differentiate between essential and nonessential characteristics, as well as identify examples and nonexamples of the concept.

1. Instruct students to put a key vocabulary word in the center box.
2. Ask students to list essential characteristics of the word in the upper left-hand box.
3. Have students list nonessential characteristics of the word in the upper right-hand box.
4. Tell students to list examples of the word in the lower left-hand box.
5. Finally, encourage students to enumerate non-examples of the word in the lower right-hand box.



WordsAlive (adapted from Virginia Department of Education, 2001)

1. Instruct students to write the vocabulary word above the first box.
2. Ask students to answer each of the five questions below the word.
3. Direct students to draw a picture that depicts the meaning of the word.
4. Have students write a caption that describes the picture and uses the vocabulary word.



WORD

What do you think the word means?

What does the dictionary say the word means?

Write a definition of the word using your own words.

What are some other words that mean the same thing as the word?

What are some other words that mean the opposite of the word?

Sketch of Word

Picture Caption Using the Word

Word Sorts (Marinak et al., 1997)

Students may complete “open” or “closed” sorts individually or in pairs.

1. In closed sorts have students put words into predetermined categories. For example:

Categories: jobs, tools, cleaning products

plumber	hammer	doctor
lever	carpenter	wrench
sailor	soap	ammonia

2. Open sorts require students to create and discuss their own categories. For example, given the following list of famous American surnames, students would be directed to generate as many categories as possible containing at least two items each.

Lincoln	Washington	Roosevelt
Jackson	Franklin	Eisenhower
Johnson	Jefferson	MacArthur
Ford	King	Kennedy

Category examples: presidents, automobiles, cities, civil rights leaders, military leaders

I Have ... Who Has? (adapted from Parrott, Henry, & Owens, 1998)

1. Prepare vocabulary word (answer) cards and definition (question) cards equal in number to the number of students in the class.
2. Give each student one definition (question) card and one vocabulary word (answer) card that answers a different question than the definition (question) card that student has received. The first student says, “Who has (and reads his question card). For example, “Who has a railroad that would stretch across a continent?”
3. The student who has the corresponding vocabulary word (answer) card says, “I have (answer). Who has (question)?” To continue the example, “I have ‘transcontinental railroad.’ Who has ‘an unfair dislike or hatred of a group because of their race or religion’?”
4. Play continues in this manner until all vocabulary words have been reviewed.

Pinwheel (adapted from Parrot et al., 1998)

1. Divide the class into groups of 6, 8, or 10. Each group forms an outer and an inner circle. Inner-circle students face out; outer-circle students face in, in such a way that each member of the inner circle is facing a partner in the outer circle. The outer circle partner faces his inner-circle partner as well.
2. Each inner-circle student is given a different vocabulary word and its corresponding definition. The inner-circle students quiz their partners on the meaning of their vocabulary words. Inner-circle partners may offer assistance, as needed.
3. After each dyad has completed reviewing its assigned word and its corresponding definition, the outside students are cued by the teacher to “pinwheel” or move one position to the right. Now, each student has a new partner, and the outside students have new vocabulary words to review. This process continues until each outside student has worked with each inside student.
4. Call, “Inside out and outside in.” Students switch roles and the process is repeated.

The Chain Game (adapted from Parrot et al., 1998)

This game may be played by groups of eight students after the class has studied the vocabulary in a specific lesson or unit of study. It provides much repetition of words and their definitions.

1. Draw eight links on the blackboard or overhead projector to create a chain, and write a vocabulary word in each link.
2. Select the first player in each group. This student chooses any word in the chain, reads the chosen word, and defines it.
3. Select the second player in each group. This student determines the direction of play on the chain by choosing a word to the right or the left of the word selected by the first player in the chain. The second player in each group reads and defines the word selected by the first player, then reads the word he or she has chosen and defines it.
4. Select successive players. Each of these players reads and defines previously selected words in the order in which his or her predecessors chose them, then reads and defines the next word in the chain.

NOTE: When the teacher selects the students, the difficulty of the task can be controlled for students who have memory deficits. Some students with memory difficulties prefer to have their turn early in the game. Some at-risk students prefer to take a turn later in the game, and take pride in repeating definition after definition, which they have learned because of the intensity of the repetition.

Vocabulary Charades (adapted from Jones, 1999)

1. Put words that describe visual concepts on cards. (examples: *hurricane, motivate*)
2. Divide the class into teams.
3. Ask a member of each team, in turn, to draw a card and “act it out.”
4. Determine a time limit by which teammates must guess the word being acted out. Assign points for each word guessed correctly by the teams.
5. Continue until all members of each team have had an opportunity to illustrate a word.

Quick Draw (Adapted from Jones, 1999)

1. Put words that describe visual concepts on cards.
2. Divide the class into teams. Ask a member of each team, in turn, to draw a card.
3. Have the student see how quickly team-mates can convey the essence of a word on the board – without words – by illustrating it.
4. Continues until all members of each team have had an opportunity to illustrate a word.

Concentration

Student pairs can play this game after studying the vocabulary in a lesson or unit.

1. Pairs of students spread out word cards and matching definition cards face down in random order in front of them on a flat desk, table, or floor.
2. Students take turns flipping over pairs of cards to try to find matching words and definitions. Each time a student finds a matching pair of cards, he or she removes them from the playing area and keeps them.
3. The student who has acquired the most cards after all cards have been removed from the playing surface wins.

Jeopardy

This game can be played with the whole class after studying the vocabulary in a unit of study.

1. Create cards that contain the definitions of key vocabulary students have studied.
2. Determine categories for these definitions.
3. Choose five definition cards per category. Assign point values to definitions according to their level of difficulty. Write the appropriate point value on the back of each definition card.
4. Organize the category labels and definitions (face down) into a Jeopardy game board on the blackboard.
5. Divide the class into two teams.
6. In turn, have the members of each team call out a category and card (by point value). Read the definition written on the card selected. If the student who selected the card can provide the word for the definition read, his team receives the assigned number of points.
7. The team with the most points wins the game.

Class-wide Peer Tutoring (adapted from Greenwood & Delquadri, 1995)

1. Divide the class into two “balanced” teams. Assign tutoring pairs within each team.
2. Prepare flashcards with vocabulary terms on one side and their definitions on the other side. (Instead of flashcards the students may use class notes taken in two-column form, with words on the left side and definitions on the right side of the page.)
3. Students take turns being the tutor and tutee during tutoring time; the teacher supervises the interactions, making note of difficult vocabulary.
4. Tutees earn points by giving correct definitions to words called out to them by their tutors. If the correct response is given initially, a predetermined number of points is awarded. If the tutee corrects an erroneous answer independently, he is awarded points as well, albeit fewer points than he would have earned if his first answer had been correct. The teacher may award bonus points for on-task tutoring and responding behaviors.

Rewards are provided for points earned during tutoring sessions. Teachers may, for example, factor points into student homework grades.

Conclusion

A teacher's thoughtful consideration of the content, purpose, and methodology related to vocabulary instruction is critical to the academic achievement of students who struggle to learn, understand, recall, and use new vocabulary meaningfully. The strategies shared in this *Considerations Packet* provide the means by which teachers can help at-risk students expand their general vocabularies and attach meaning to technical words. These skills are critical to academic success in all content areas.

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Additional Resources

The following resources on vocabulary are available for loan through the T/TAC W&M library. Call 1-800-323-4489 and select the library option to request a material. Visit our web site at <http://www.wm.edu/TTAC> for a complete listing of all of our materials, which can be requested on-line. Select the Library link off the home page and enter *Curricula – language arts*, *Curricula – reading*, *Curricula – study skills*, or *Teaching Strategies* as the subject of your search.

Handbook in diagnostic-prescriptive teaching (abridged 2nd ed.), P. Mann, P. Suiter, & R. M. McClung, (CRD3)

Cognitive strategy instruction that really improves children's academic performance (2nd ed.). M. Pressley & V. Woloshyn, (TT60)

Reading strategies and practices (4th ed.), R. J. Tierney, J. E. Readence, & E. K. Dishner Boston, (CRD16)

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