Direct Instruction of Academic Vocabulary: What About Real Reading? Stephen Krashen
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This is a comment on a paper that appeared in the most recent issue of the Reading Research Quarterly, Nagy and Townsend's "Words as tools: Learning academic vocabulary as language acquisition" (RRQ, 47(1), 2012). Because of its focus on instruction and intervention, the article gives the impression that direct instruction is the only means for the development of academic vocabulary.

Nagy and Townsend emphasized that "vocabulary learning must occur in authentic contexts, with students having many opportunities to learn how target words interact with, garner meaning from, and support meanings of other words" (p. 98), but they did not mention that this happens when we read real texts we are interested in and focus on their meaning.

Nagy has published compelling evidence supporting the hypothesis that we gradually acquire vocabulary from reading for meaning, evidence that suggests that reading alone can do the job of building a large vocabulary, and that reading for meaning is more efficient than direct instruction for vocabulary development (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; Nagy, Anderson and Herman, 1987; Nagy and Herman, 1987). After studying the size of the vocabulary appearing in printed school English, Nagy and Anderson (1984) conclude that "our findings indicate that even the most ruthlessly systematic direct vocabulary instruction could neither account for a significant proportion of all the words the children actually learn, nor cover more than a modest proportion of the words they will encounter in school reading materials" (p. 304).

Nagy and Townsend conclude that successful intervention consist of "rich vocabulary instruction," which goes far beyond the usual idea of direct instruction. It "consists largely in providing students with multiple opportunities to use the instructed words, both receptively and productively, generally in the context of discussion about academic content" (p. 101). In the studies cited in Nagy and Townsend, this kind of direct instruction of academic language has a positive effect: Students do learn some academic words in these studies. But we must nevertheless ask, "compared to what?" (Coles, 2003). Comparison groups did not engage in genuine academic reading for their own purposes.

Based by Nagy's earlier work as well as other research showing the power of reading (Krashen, 2004), there is good reason to hypothesize that academic vocabulary is acquired gradually through genuine academic reading for the readers' own purposes and this path is more effective and efficient than even rich instruction. It is reasonable to hypothesize that two stages are involved: (1) extensive self-selected reading for pleasure, which provides the linguistic and conceptual background that makes academic reading more comprehensible (2) selective reading of a large number of academic texts, in an area of great personal interest to the reader.

Obvious arguments against relying on direct instruction for more than a small fraction of vocabulary development include the fact that the meanings and grammatical properties of academic words are often very complex; even professional linguists sometimes disagree on their

precise definitions and conditions of use (see e.g. Hyland, 1996). Also, there are a lot of academic words, more than can be taught one at a time.

Many people have acquired a great deal of academic vocabulary without instruction, certainly without traditional direct instruction and even without the rich instruction Nagy and Townsend describe. In fact, I doubt that any member of the human race has ever consciously learned more than very modest amounts of academic language. This claim, of course, is subject to empirical investigation.

References

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