

ALEX QUIGLEY

ONE WORD AT A TIME

IF STUDENTS ARE TO CONQUER THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW CURRICULUM, HELPING THEM DEVELOP RICH, SPECIALIST VOCABULARY FROM THE START IS CRUCIAL, URGES ALEX QUIGLEY

Ask a secondary school teacher about the new curriculum, at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5, and they'll likely tell you a similar story: the degree of difficulty is more formidable than anything we have seen for a generation. From a wealth of powerful knowledge to absorb and understand, to a battery of examinations to negotiate, our students are facing up to significant new challenges.

It may be hard to know where to start really, but start we must. Clearly, we need to ensure that our KS3 curriculum adequately prepares our students for the rigours of the new GCSEs that lie ahead, and more. That being said, if we simply stuff more challenging content into the lessons of our younger students, we face compounding the issue still further. Although we accept that we are facing a towering challenge, we should not forget that every tower is built brick by brick. If we go back to basics we can actually decipher that much of the increased difficulty amounts to more subject knowledge and the concurrent increase in sophisticated vocabulary required to describe that knowledge. Students are being faced with harder texts, using more complex vocabulary, earlier than ever.

Starting points

On a simple level, all learning in schools comes back to vocabulary knowledge. If our students can tackle tricky language with alacrity then they'll know their isotopes from their isobars, and follow more successfully when they need to bisect in maths or dissect in science.

Many of our students come ably prepared for joining secondary school with a vocabulary of circa 25,000 words. In contrast, some of our 'word poor' learners possess less than half that. Language experts estimate that a successful young person leaving formal education has around 50,000 words at their disposal. That should see their vocabulary growing by thousands each year.

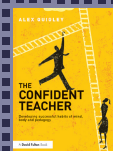
Now, a great deal of vocabulary learning is implicit and happens by students simply coming to school and listening, talking and reading daily; however, we should not assume that this process will best prepare our students for the increased literacy demands of the newly coined GCSE and A levels. We can go one better. By being conscious of vocabulary gaps between our students, and explicitly teaching to mitigate the increased vocabulary demand, we give all of our students the tools to succeed.

Make it obvious

So isn't all this the job of English teachers? Well, reading in English is essential, but accessing and understanding a source in history, or an experiment in science, is just as paramount. If a student doesn't know up to 95% of the words in any given text, they'll struggle to comprehend it, regardless of the subject.



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We can help students succeed by explicitly teaching them the specialist vocabulary of our subject, deliberately and repeatedly. We know that handing a weak reader a dictionary resembles passing them an umbrella to fend off a hurricane. They need more structured, explicit teaching: from student friendly explanations and helpful analogies to repeated practice in speaking, hearing and using sophisticated vocabulary.

Every teacher has a responsibility to help our students read with confidence and understanding. We can make language come alive in lots of different ways in our classroom, fostering a curiosity and interest in our specialist words and their meanings. Here are just a few examples of strategies you could try:

Tell word tales: Most words in our storied language have an intriguing tale to tell. For example, if you are a geography teacher looking for a story to provide a memorable hook, you needn't go far. How about the word 'Arctic' meaning 'near the bear'? Not because of its roaming polar bears, but because of its proximity to the constellation Ursa Major – the 'Great Bear'.

Pick words apart: Most of our academic words are from Latin and Greek derivations. With an understanding of some common prefixes and suffixes, like 'de' or 'anti', for example students have the tools to unlock comprehension of a wealth of words.

Make meaning maps: If you are teaching a tricky new word like 'photosynthesis' then you can make a 'meaning map' – unpicking the word, explaining its origins, and linking it to similar scientific words.

Working subject glossaries: A word list can prove inert, but by beginning a topic or course with a blank slate of key words and encouraging students to enquire around their meanings, you can invoke curiosity and deeper understanding.

Alphaboxes: Simply create an alphabetical list, organised into boxes, and encourage students to populate the 'alphaboxes' with essential subject vocabulary.

Word of the week: Every subject can promote a habitual interest in words by sharing their 'word of the week' or having 'word walls' that create an omnipresent interest in academic vocabulary.

When an interest in and curiosity for word knowledge permeates every classroom, students can become more fluent readers, better facing up to the challenges of a tough curriculum with greater confidence.

