

Harmon, J., & Hedrick, W. (2005). Research of vocabulary instruction in the content areas: Implications for struggling readers. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 21, 261-280.

Key Words: content area literacy

Summary:

This article summarizes research concerning content area vocabulary instruction. The authors present important principles that focus on how to improve vocabulary instruction for struggling middle and high school students.

Assumptions:

- To understand content area textbook students need a well-developed word knowledge base. This assumes an existing knowledge base for concepts that are addressed in the text.
- Students are bombarded by unfamiliar terms that are not integrated across content areas. Most of these are low-frequency words.
- Students who engage in wide reading develop extensive vocabularies and are better prepared to handle content area reading.
- In order to support vocabulary development, content area teachers must consider students as word learners, the nature of content vocabulary, and effective vocabulary instructional practices.
- Struggling readers need assistance in developing independent word learning strategies for the content areas.

Results:

- Students learn and retain content vocabulary when they are allowed to select the important terms, make personal connections, and monitor their own learning progress.
- Explicit instruction characterized by integration, repetition, and meaningful use positively affects vocabulary acquisition.
- The use of graphic organizers accompanied by in-depth discussions can effectively influence mathematical word learning for fourth-grade students.
- Pre-teaching social studies vocabulary terms showed improved reading comprehension in fifth-grade students.
- Discussion and direct student involvement appear to be important components in science vocabulary instruction
- Provide opportunities to engage in independent reading.
- Relate below grade level trade books to content area topics.
- Use context-based approaches and avoid drill and practice activities.

Conclusion:

This research review confirms that ensuring that students have a conceptual understanding of content area vocabulary is essential for success in content area subjects. The suggestions represented in this article, which are effective for all

students, encourage the use of meaningful strategies that allow deeper processing and active involvement.

#### Suggestions for Teachers:

- Find ways to encourage wide reading.
- Select (or better yet, ask students to select) several key terms from each chapter/unit of content area instruction. Use these as vocabulary words.
- Engage students in activities with these words that are meaningful, context-based, and engaging.

#### Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Provide professional development that focuses on the “hows and whys” of vocabulary instruction in the content areas.
- Work with K-12 groups by content areas to help teachers select key concepts for focus at each grade level.