Vocabulary: Informal Assessments **3**

There is nothing simple about knowing a word. . . .Words themselves are just plain interesting, and our ultimate goal is to create lifelong word lovers.

(Rasinski, Padak, Newton, & Newton, 2008, pp. 14, 22)

MEET TANIYSHA

Taniysha is a sixth grader who performed poorly on recent state reading assessments, especially in reading comprehension and vocabulary. In addition to resource support, she receives co-taught language arts instruction as a Tier 1 intervention. After reviewing assessment results from all students, co-teachers Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe decided to emphasize reading comprehension and vocabulary development with their class.

To address student needs, the co-teachers conducted several informal vocabulary assessments with Taniysha's class. They wanted to have as much data as possible to prepare for Taniysha's upcoming IEP meeting and plan an intensive, integrated vocabulary instruction program for all students in their co-taught class.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter provides background knowledge regarding the importance of vocabulary. This information shows why Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe want to emphasize vocabulary instruction in their co-taught class. The chapter then includes examples of informal assessments these teachers used in their class and how they linked Taniysha's assessment results to her IEP.

IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY

Vocabulary, or word knowledge, is critical for school success for many reasons. First, as suggested in Taniysha's case, vocabulary and reading comprehension are closely connected. The National Reading Panel (2000) identified vocabulary as one of five essential skills connected with reading. If, after third grade, students can decode accurately at an acceptable rate but still experience comprehension difficulties, the issue may be a vocabulary deficit. These students often struggle with the less common, more academic words in content-area texts. If students do not know the meaning of 90–95% of the words in their text, they will experience great difficulty with comprehension and reading fluency.

Second, vocabulary is highly correlated with content-area success. Poor vocabulary knowledge negatively affects a student's ability to participate fully in classroom routines and conversations. Students who have poor vocabularies have difficulty understanding much of the oral and written language around them. They have difficulty processing new words within the rapid flow of classroom conversation.

Third, vocabulary impacts knowledge acquisition and thought development. Students who know more words have more abstract language to categorize new concepts. Without labels provided by words, students often lose ideas, because they have no systematic labels under which to file newly learned concepts. This is especially true in content areas such as science, social studies, and math. Vocabulary is essential to knowledge acquisition.

VOCABULARY DEFINED

Truly knowing a word encompasses the entire spectrum of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. By carefully analyzing the various features of word knowledge, teachers determine how best to provide vocabulary enhancing experiences for students.

First, vocabulary development is *incremental*, that is, it takes place in small steps over time. Students gain additional information about a word with each meaningful contextualized encounter. Experts maintain that students need 10–15 encounters with a word in meaningful contexts to truly "own" the word.

Word knowledge is *multidimensional*. To know a word means knowing the phonological form (sounds, syllables), morphological form (prefix, root, suffix), spelling, meaning, the role the word can play in sentences, and the linguistic history or etymology. To promote student vocabulary

growth, teachers must consider all these dimensions through explicit vocabulary instruction.

Words are *polysemous*; that is, they have multiple meanings. The more common the word, the more meanings it is likely to have. For example, *check* can mean *to examine, inspect,* or *hold back* as a verb, or as a noun it can mean *a mark* or *a note for money.* Students must learn that a word's meaning can change depending upon its use. This is often difficult for students with disabilities, as they tend to be convergent in their vocabulary application.

Words are not isolated units but are connected in categories and subcategories, and each is associated with related words. Students remember and retrieve new words more easily if the words are connected in a meaningful network to background knowledge. Activating background knowledge and developing associations are critical to the successful development of word knowledge.

INFORMAL ASSESSMENTS

Few classroom friendly vocabulary assessments are available that inform instruction and measure vocabulary growth (Stahl & Bravo, 2010). Even so, teachers can use various informal assessments to assess student vocabulary knowledge and growth.

Assess Vocabulary Through Writing

One method is to tally the number of *mature words* (words containing eight or more letters) a student used in a timed writing sample (even if the word was misspelled) in response to a specific prompt. In this approach, the teacher (a) provides a uniform writing prompt, (b) instructs students to think about the prompt for one minute, and (c) provides three minutes for students to write. However, giving students a specified writing prompt might not assess the full depth of their writing skills. An alternative is to read a short story, ask students to write brief phrases about any connections that came to mind as they listened to that story, have them talk about their connections with a classmate, and after several minutes of sharing, tell students to select one connection to write extensively about. Set the timer for five minutes.

When using either method, collect samples and tally results. Use the chart in Figure 3.1 to document results. Do this several times throughout the school year, noting changes in the student's use of mature words. You may want to involve students in scoring or return the scored passage to be rewritten with more sophisticated vocabulary.

Figure 3.1 Mature Word Use Chart

Date	Total Words Written	Total Mature Words Used Correctly	Percentage Of Mature Words Used

Assess Knowledge of Specific Words

One assessment that uses specific vocabulary words, which is sensitive to incremental vocabulary growth and uses self-reporting, is the vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) (Stahl & Bravo, 2010). Figure 3.2 provides an example of a VKS that Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe developed for Taniysha's class.

Figure 3.2 Stages of Word Knowledge Assessment

1. Read the word in column one.
2. After you read the word, think about your knowledge of that word.
3. Select the column that matches your knowledge of the word.
   a. If you have never seen that word before, check column 1.
   b. If you have seen the word before, but you do not know what it means, check column 2.
   c. If you think you know what the word means, write the meaning in column 3.
   d. If you have seen this word before and are sure you know what it means, write the meaning in column 4.
   e. If you wrote the definition in column 4, go to column 5 and write the word in a complete sentence.

(Continued)

Figure 3.2 (Continued)

Points Awarded > Section ∨	1	2	3	4	5
Word	I've never seen this word before.	I've seen this word, but I do not know what it means.	I think it means . . .	I know this word. It means . . .	I can use this word in a sentence. My sentence is . . . (You must also fill in Column 4.)

The co-teachers administered and scored the assessment using this guide:

For filling in Column 1, earn 1 point as indicated in the top row.

For filling in Column 2, earn 2 points as indicated in the top row.

For filling in Column 3, earn 3 points if the definition provided is correct, 2 points if it is incorrect, even if the student has attempted to fill out columns 4 and 5.

For filling in Column 4, earn 4 points as indicated in the top row if the definition provided is correct.

For filling in Column 5, earn 5 points as indicated in the top row if the sentence is both grammatically and semantically correct. If the sentence is not grammatically correct, 4 points are earned. If the word is not used appropriately in the sentence, 3 points are awarded.

In this assessment, students must prove what they know rather than merely indicating they have knowledge. The VKS can be used as a pre- and posttest to indicate growth. Using numeric scores, teachers can develop a class rank order. A student's score can be compared to the class average to include on an IEP or for RTI data collection.

Assess Knowledge of Word Parts

Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe can also assess student knowledge of word parts, which are prefixes, root words or base words, and suffixes. All multisyllable words have at least one base word or root word. A base is a complete word that can stand by itself, such as *believe.* A root also provides meaning, but it is not a complete word; an example is *struct* in the word *construction* (Bursuck & Damer, 2007). For brevity, we will use only the term *root* in this chapter.

One informal assessment of student knowledge of word parts is part of the University of Kansas's word mapping program (Harris, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2008). Teachers develop an assessment of five words containing common prefixes, roots, and suffixes that will be covered that year or semester, or an assessment of words using common affixes. (See Appendix A for common prefixes and suffixes). Students subdivide each word into its meaningful parts, write the meaning for each part, and write the meaning of the entire word, as they have determined it based on their understanding of the parts.

Teachers calculate the score based on the number of correctly completed sections. For example, the word *construction* can be divided into three parts (*con* = with, *struct* = to build, *tion* = act or process) and would be worth seven points: one point for dividing each syllable correctly, one point for each correct syllable definition, and one point for the correct overall definition, which is "the act of building with something." Because this assessment yields a numeric score, teachers can determine the class average and rank order scores.

Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe developed and administered this assessment and also included a question that asked students to list the steps of the EDGE strategy, a strategy they developed for teaching affixes that includes these steps, using the word *biology* as an example:

E—*Examine* the word for morphemes.

D—*Divide* the word according to morphemes (*bi* and *ology*).

G—*Gain* meaning for each morpheme (*bi* = life, *ology* = study of).

E—*Enter* the meaning of the whole word (biology is the study of life).

Assess Vocabulary Through Speaking

Teachers can also informally assess vocabulary in oral language. Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe decided to assess Taniysha's use of oral language in class. They agreed on a discussion topic that would elicit the most

verbal responses. Mr. Kiburz led the discussion and called on Taniysha while Ms. Monroe recorded and tallied Taniysha's words. Teachers can use these data to assess oral vocabulary use and growth over time. Teachers teaching by themselves can request assistance from a colleague or use a tape recorder.

TANIYSHA'S INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM

Mr. Kiburz and Ms. Monroe summarized these informal assessment data to develop Taniysha's present level of functioning for her IEP meeting. They will share these data with the team, develop goals and objectives, and plan ways to support Taniysha's vocabulary development.

Figure 3.3 Taniysha's IEP

Individualized Education Program

Name: Taniysha   Grade: 6   Skill Area: Vocabulary

Present Level of Performance: Informal assessments reveal that Taniysha (1) wrote 20 words with two mature words (10%) during a 3-minute writing activity; (2) earned 11/50 points on the *VKS* assessment, in which she was unable to correctly define any vocabulary terms from the sixth-grade language arts curriculum; and (3) earned 8/35 points on the *word mapping* assessment, in which she identified five prefixes and the correct meaning of three of those five prefixes from words from the sixth-grade language arts curriculum. These scores placed Taniysha in the lowest 10th percentile of her class. During class discussion, Taniysha provided two- to three-word responses to direct questions. She also indicated that she did not know how to study vocabulary words except to "try to memorize them."

Annual Goal: Taniysha will correctly write vocabulary words (from the sixth-grade language arts curriculum) in original sentences through classroom activities, homework assignments, and on vocabulary quizzes with at least 80% accuracy.

Objective 1: Each quarter, when provided with a written list of 20 new multisyllabic vocabulary words from the 6th grade language arts curriculum containing common morphemes, Taniysha will independently separate each word into its morphemes, write the meaning of each morpheme, and write the meaning of the whole word with at least 80% accuracy.

Objective 2: By the end of 36 weeks, when verbally given a story starter followed by 1 minute to think and 3 minutes to write, Taniysha will write at least 40 words (with at least six mature words) that complete the story starter.

Objective 3: Each week, upon teacher verbal request, Taniysha will correctly write the key word and definition for four of five new vocabulary words presented that week.

SUMMARY

For various reasons, many students do not possess the extensive vocabulary knowledge that is critical for school success. For these students, especially, we cannot leave our vocabulary instruction to chance; instead we must use careful and purposeful planning. This planning begins with using assessment data to pinpoint student needs. Teachers can assess students' vocabulary through their writing or speaking, using a variety of informal assessments.

CHAPTER APPLICATION ACTIVITIES

Apply your knowledge from the chapter by discussing or completing the following application questions or activities. Suggested answers are provided below.

1. Mrs. Sloan had students write about what they did over July 4th. How many mature words (eight letters or more if the word was spelled correctly) are contained in Vicki's response, shown below?

   Over july 4th, we had a lot of fun. We went to the Dow City celabrasun and it was magniffacent. They had good food and rides for everyone. I liked the sky esposives the best.

2. You decide to use the VKS to assess your students' vocabulary knowledge. How many points would you award to Candice, who wrote the following?

Points Awarded > Section ∨	1	2	3	4	5
Word	I've never seen this word before.	I've seen this word, but I do not know what it means.	I think it means . . .	I know this word. It means . . .	I can use this word in a sentence. My sentence is . . . (you must also do Section 4)
imprinting			X to write something neatly		

3. You also decide to assess Malachi's knowledge of selected words from the curriculum using the word mapping procedure. The first word on the assessment was *reformable.* Malachi completed the assessment as follows:

re- form- able re means to do again The word means to form something again

How many points (out of 7) would you provide Malachi on his response?

Suggested Responses

Based on the directions from the chapter, here are the correct responses:

1. (4): celebration, magnificent, everyone, explosives

2. (2) the response is incorrect; award credit that Candice acknowledges seeing the word

3. (5) Malachi divided the word correctly, so he earns 1 point for each syllable (3 points total), he correctly indicated the meaning of "re" for 1 point, and he provided a correct definition of the whole word for 1 point.

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES FOR CHAPTER 3

Beck, I., McKeown, M., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Foil, C., & Alber, S. (2002). Fun and effective ways to build your students' vocabulary. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 37*(3), 131–139.

Mountain, L. (2002). Flip-a-chip to build vocabulary. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 46*(1), 62–68.