Cutting to the Common Core
Making Vocabulary Number One

Dr. Kate Kinsella offers strategies for prioritizing vocabulary for competent text analysis, discussi

Shifts in Text Emphases and Response Tasks

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) call upon students to tackle increasingly complex informational and narrative texts and articulate their comprehension using academic register. Beyond the primary grades, developing readers must digest detailed concept- and data-driven passages and extract essential content in order to respond to text-dependent questions. Whether countering an argument during a formal class debate or crafting an evidence-based constructed written response, students must adeptly draw from sources using advanced syntax, precise vocabulary, and accurate grammar.

Prior to the launch of the Common Core State Standards, narrative texts were the curricular mainstay in English language arts. Upper-elementary and secondary English faculty are now scrambling to integrate authentic and adequately challenging informational texts within their literature-centric units of study. Social studies and science colleagues are similarly searching for relevant articles and primary source documents to complement their textbook chapters. Fortunately, abundant selections are currently available from both Internet sources and traditional classroom periodical subscriptions that target specific grade levels and subject areas.

Once educators have obtained an appropriate supplemental text for a particular unit, they are faced with a number of lesson-planning responsibilities. The first task is thoroughly reading the informational text and considering foundational background knowledge some or many students may lack that would inhibit even rudimentary compre-

hension. A subsequent task is preparing a sequence of questions to guide mature text navigation and response. Having drafted essential questions that delve into central concepts, claims, and supporting evidence, content literacy mentors must turn their attention to the text's lexical demands.

Word Knowledge and Academic Achievement

Numerous studies in K-12 contexts have documented the strong and reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension for native English speakers (Graves, 2000; Stahl, 1999). Research focused on school-age English learners similarly correlates vocabulary knowledge with second-language reading comprehension and other measures of school success, including test scores and writing (August & Shanahan, 2006; Carlo et al, 2005). In fact, word knowledge proves to be the most reliable predictor of English-learner academic achievement across grade levels and the curriculum (Marzano, 2004; Saville-Troike, 1984).

Vocabulary Lesson Pitfalls

Since vocabulary prowess plays such a pivotal role in reading comprehension and response, educators serving linguistically diverse and mixed-ability classes must have a viable process for identifying words that will maximize students' text engagement and understanding. Attempting to address every single word that we anticipate one or even every student may not recognize is time consuming and unrealistic. More seriously, we risk leading neophyte content-area readers to
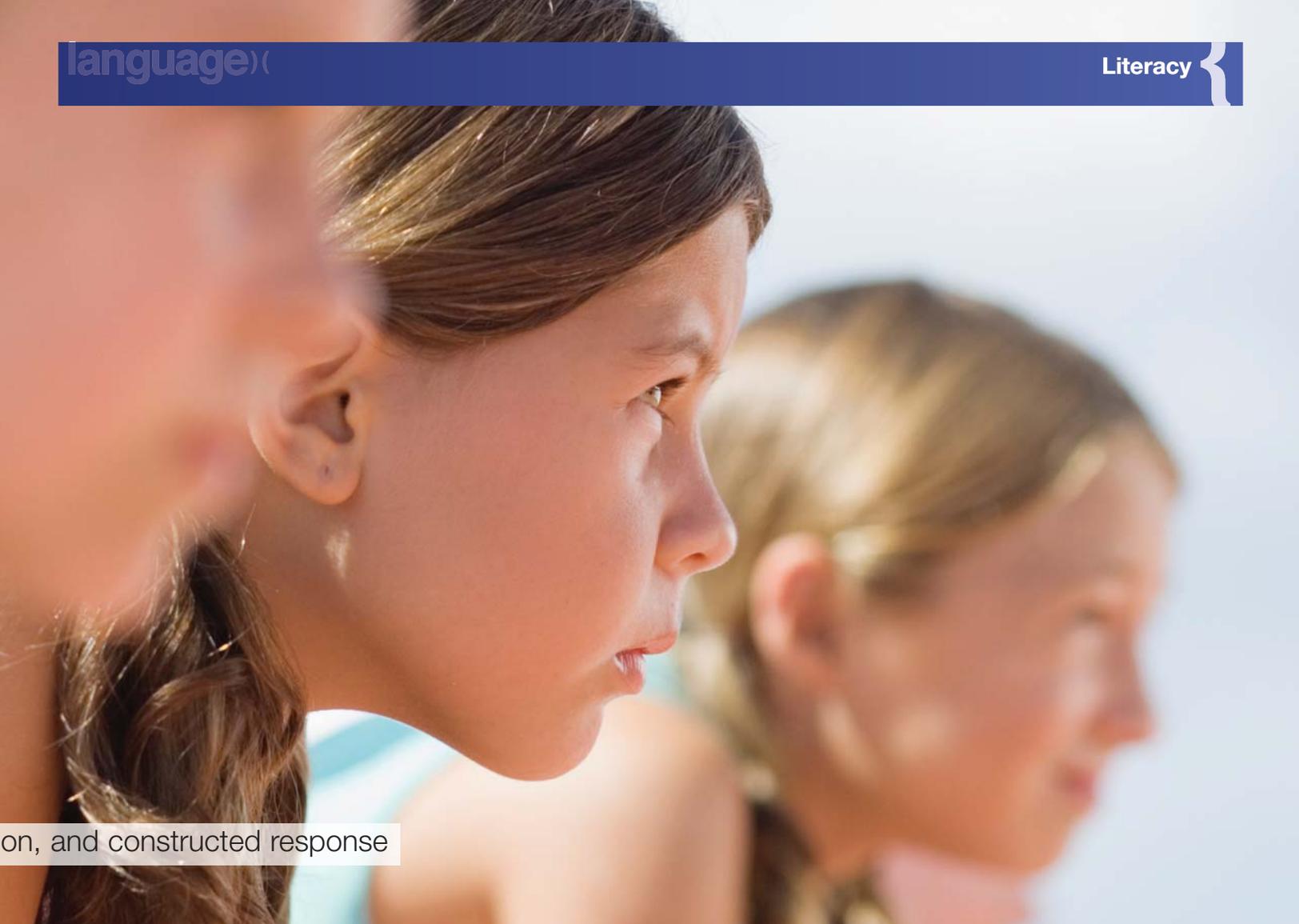
on, and constructed response

the disparaging conclusion that mastery of demanding course material is synonymous with 100% comprehension of text vocabulary. For students with acute lexical anemia, like many English learners and under-resourced classmates, this is an unrealistic prospect. They must be encouraged to grapple with challenging text, tolerating some lexical ambiguity while focusing on identifying the most significant content. If we provide targeted instruction on high-yield words for particular text passages and coach mature reading and study skills, academic English learners will approach this arduous process with more confidence and stamina.

Content-area colleagues who contend that in the Common Core era, students must independently grapple with the linguistic obstacles posed by their complex text assignments are confusing high-stakes assessment scenarios with daily instructional protocols. Leaving under-prepared students to their own devices to safely navigate lexical landmines in core lesson material is tantamount to instructional mutiny. K-12 educators cannot abandon their pedagogical responsibility to provide curricular access in the name of career and college readiness. By selectively and effectively addressing high-yield words, teachers across subject areas can manageably and productively enhance reading comprehension while assisting their students in building a practical vocabulary toolkit they can apply to related response tasks and future texts.

Without informed and proactive analysis of the lexical demands of a text, a teacher can squander an inordinate amount of lesson time on words that may well be unfamiliar but have little bearing on stu-

dents' grasp of key ideas and details. Further, approaching a text-based lesson "preparation free," it is tempting for a teacher to engage in "lexical accessorizing," explicating unusual or intriguing word usage for a verbally precocious class minority as less adept academic English speakers remain paralyzed with confusion. While we certainly want to engender word consciousness and curiosity, forays into ironic or provocative word play in text passages should follow, not replace, frontloading of vocabulary central to comprehension of the author's major claims and support.

Categorizing Words in Texts

For educators in grades 4-12 assigning conceptually and linguistically rigorous text, the critical lesson-planning question then becomes "What words will promote comprehension and articulate response?" Intensive instruction is imperative to produce reliable and in-depth word knowledge (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). However, we can only teach a fraction of the words students may not recognize or fully understand in a standards-aligned authentic text. When serving mixed-ability classes including English learners, explicit, interactive instruction will reap the greatest text comprehension gains when words are related to focal lesson concepts or when words have general utility in academic contexts.

Well-written, authentic informational texts are characterized by lexical precision. Scholars and professional authors reference topics using precise terms and do not refrain from substituting everyday words like *enough* with academic synonyms like *sufficient* or *ade-*

quate. In contrast, in engineered decodable texts for basic readers, vocabulary is carefully controlled to provide maximum exposure to the phonics targets and high-frequency words.

To assist K-12 teachers in analyzing the lexical demands of authentic texts, vocabulary scholars have proposed various criteria. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan have provided a widely used classification scheme for organizing words within a narrative or informational text. Tier I words are everyday nouns and verbs like *neighbor* and *return*, largely acquired through social interaction, and warrant little or no instruction in upper-grade content coursework. U.S. newcomers will certainly require elaborate attention to Tier I commonplace words, but this foundational vocabulary should be introduced and applied in a dedicated English language development context, not incidentally and haphazardly within a social studies or science lesson.

Tier II words are more advanced academic words with wide and varied applicability across subject areas. The verb *respond* instead of the Tier I conversational counterpart *answer* and adjective *significant* instead of *important* are examples of Tier II general-use academic words that could be encountered in curricula as diverse as social studies and art. In this framework, Tier II words also include more sophisticated and precise words for interaction and description, such as using the adjectives *livid* and *disappointed* to describe negative personal reactions in lieu of *mad* and *sad*. These nuanced and articulate replacements for casual conversational words are more likely to appear in literary selections than informational texts.

Tier III words are topic-specific terms used in technical material within a particular academic discipline. The science term *photosynthesis* and literary term *onomatopoeia* exemplify Tier III words with highly focused yet limited usage within a specific field of study. These terms often have short-term value within a particular unit rather than wide applicability over a year-long curriculum.

Selecting High-Yield Words That Drive Comprehension and Articulate Response

Grade-level course material typically contains an orchestration of topic-specific Tier III vocabulary and topic-neutral high-utility Tier II vocabulary. Classifying words within a text is an enlightening lesson-planning step, but it doesn't pare down words for instructional primacy. With limited instructional minutes and a tome of words students are unlikely to know, teachers benefit from a set of practical guidelines and focusing questions to make informed decisions about words that will receive intensive, brief, or no instruction.

Feldman and Kinsella (2008) offer content-area colleagues nuanced guidelines for prioritizing words in informational texts for explicit lesson instruction. Instead of classifying words in tiers, these scholars recommend faculty in grades 4 and beyond consider two major categories when designing vocabulary instruction for a text-based lesson: **domain-specific vocabulary** (topic-centric, discipline-specific) and **high-utility vocabulary** (topic-neutral, interdisciplinary).

Their word-selection criteria for informational text lessons focus on two principal considerations:

■ Words that are important to understanding and discussing the key ideas and details within the informational text
■ Words that are useful for students to engage in literate discourse about the text and across academic disciplines

Choosing Words to Teach in Informational Text

■ Choose essential idea words that name or relate to the central concepts and topics addressed in lesson materials (*global warming, outsourcing, sleep deprivation*).
■ Choose high-utility, widely applicable **academic toolkit** words that students are likely to encounter in diverse materials across subject areas (*essential, bias, consider*).
■ Choose members of a high-frequency **academic word family**, words that have derivations or "word cousins" utilized regularly across disciplines (*assume/assumption; similar/similarity* —see Coxhead, 2000).
■ Choose **polysemous** (multiple-meaning) words that have a new academic meaning in the text in addition to a more familiar meaning (*wave* as in "wave of immigrants" vs. a greeting or ocean wave).

Guiding Questions to Plan Vocabulary Instruction in Informational Text Lessons
Domain-Specific Vocabulary: Topic-Centric, Conceptual, Technical

1. Which words are most vital to understanding the text's central concepts, key ideas, and essential details?

2. Is the concept significant and does it therefore require pre-teaching?

3. Are there words that can be grouped together to enhance understanding of a central concept?

4. How much prior knowledge will students have about this word or its related concepts?

High-Utility Vocabulary:
Topic-Neutral, Widely Used Across Disciplines

1. What high-utility academic words are included in this informational text section that are synonyms for more commonplace words students will no doubt already know (*insufficient, not enough; issue, problem; essential, necessary; perspective, idea/opinion*)?

2. What high-utility academic words are included in text analysis and discussion questions or related writing prompts that will be necessary for students to respond competently on lesson tasks or assessments?

3. Is it sufficient for students to simply recognize and understand this word (receptive vocabulary) or will they need to competently use this word (productive vocabulary) at this stage of first- or second-language development?

4. Does the word have another high-frequency meaning that I should address (is the word *critical* polysemous — judgmental vs. crucial)?

5. Does the word have high-frequency word family members that I should point out (*analyze*, verb; *analysis*, noun; *analytical*, adjective)?

6. Which words can easily be figured out from the context/text resources during either independent or teacher-mediated reading?

Applying Word Selection Criteria in a Narrow Reading Unit

In my recent curricula for adolescent English learners in grades 6-12, *English 3D* (Course 1, 2011; Course 2, 2013), I selected authentic, age-appropriate informational texts for "narrow reading" units. Narrow reading units differ from literary thematic units in that each informational text addresses the same topic but from a different vantage point. In narrow reading units, critical background information is typically recycled before new perspectives and evidence are detailed. In the three articles that comprise this narrow reading unit on adolescent sleep issues, the biological and environmental reasons for teen sleep loss are always introduced before the author explores physical, mental, or academic consequences and proactive solutions.

Narrow reading units mirror the complexities of college-level course assignments in that advanced study requires tackling a number of texts on a specific topic from varied sources. One of the decided attributes of narrow reading for academic English learners is the predictable recycling of key concepts and related high-utility words and phrases, consolidating students' background knowledge while increasing receptive

word knowledge (Krashen, 2004; Schmitt & Carter, 2000). In a literary thematic unit on development of identity, students might read a poem, a short story, and a scene from a play, none of which include specific vocabulary students will require to adeptly respond to a writing prompt with lexical precision related to the theme.

The initial narrow reading unit in *English 3D* focuses on issues related to adolescent sleep deprivation. I devoted considerable time to prioritizing the vocabulary in each of the three informational articles that would support reading comprehension and academic discourse development. While teaching content literacy to scores of adolescent English learners and first-generation college students, I have found it useful to refer to topic-related words as "words to know" and "high-utility" words as "words to go." I strove to balance topic-related terms essential to the unit focus on impacts of sleep loss (i.e., words to know) with high-utility words students could apply in speaking and writing tasks within this unit and subsequent units (i.e., words to go). I first prepared a detailed lesson to frontload or pre-teach key concepts and topic-related words at the unit launch. I then prepared brief subsequent lessons to explicitly target and practice adeptly using a few high-utility words students would encounter within a particular text section.

In the excerpt below from one of the authentic texts I included in my narrow reading unit, I have noted topic-related "words to know" in boldface uppercase and high-utility "words to go" in boldface lower-

"Narrow reading units differ from literary thematic units in that each informational text addresses the same topic but from a different vantage point."

case. This brief excerpt illustrates the lexical density and precision of authentic, complex informational texts. Unlike literary selections, authentic informational texts tend to utilize vocabulary one needs to engage in competent academic communication about the topic, whereas the requisite vocabulary for discussion of literary themes and developments is typically located in the related discussion questions and writing prompts, not the actual narrative passages.

Americans are said to be a SLEEP-DEPRIVED people, and teenagers are the worst of the lot. Most are lucky to get six, seven, or eight hours of sleep a night, even though studies have repeatedly shown that people in their teens and possibly even early twenties need nine to ten hours. Many live in a state of CHRONIC sleep DEFICIT that can **affect** mood, behavior, schoolwork, and reaction time... Physical, emotional, and social **factors** seem to conspire against letting ADOLESCENTS get enough sleep... For reasons that are not fully understood, Dr. Carskadon said, their body clocks shift, so that their natural tendency is to stay up later at night and wake up later in the morning than when they were younger... There are consequences. For one thing, lack of sleep can interfere with learning...

Source: Grady, Denise. 2002. "Sleep Is One Thing Missing in Busy Teenage Lives," *The New York Times.*

Topic Words: "Words to Know"
adolescent (n)
sleep-deprived (adj), *sleep deprivation* (n)
deficit (n)
hormone (n), *hormonal* (adj)
chronic (adj)

High-Utility Words: "Words to Go"
Section 1: *affect* (v), *factor* (n), *tend to* (v) / *tendency* (n), *consequence* (n), *respond* (v) / *response* (n)
Section 2: *survey* (v), *incompatible* (adj) / *compatible* (adj)
Section 3: *data* (n), *approach* (n)

The Double Duty of Identifying Words to Teach in Narrative Texts
Preparing students to read and competently respond to narrative text is double the work when it comes to vocabulary instruction. English language arts and world language instructors are inclined to focus on unusual or clever word usage within narrative passages in large part because those are the word choices designated by the publisher of the adopted course materials. Editors working on literary anthologies and basal textbooks characteristically highlight words simply because

they are rarely used, sophisticated, esoteric, or arcane. English language arts materials provide a vocabulary bank at the end of a selection that often amounts to a vocabulary fast food diet, devoid of lexical nutrients that could fuel a student's response to the analysis questions and writing prompts. The instructor then spends considerable lesson time engaging in point-of-use meaning, explicating these typically low-incidence vocabulary "stumblers" because they are ironically the lexical items in the end-of-unit assessment. Meanwhile, less-proficient readers and English learners tackle their constructed written responses with a limited and ineffectual toolkit to address the actual theme, plot, or character development. To add insult to injury, the fledgling academic language users receive a weak score on the course rubric item "The writer uses fresh words and phrases." It is impossible to craft agile, articulate prose when you lack the lexical foundations and haven't even engaged in scaffolded academic discussion prior to being required to write.

Preparing less-confident readers and English learners for the vocabulary demands of a literary text involves judicious attention to unfamiliar, high-leverage words within the text as well as words that will enable the student to competently discuss the text. Relying on publishers to identify high-priority words within passages isn't the consideration. A proactive educator should scrutinize the passage students will be assigned to identify vocabulary that is absolutely essential to comprehending the lesson questions. Often, students can read a lengthy passage containing an array of unfamiliar words that have little bearing on comprehension of the theme, plot development, or character evolution. The most reliable source of essential unit vocabulary is the list of guiding questions and writing prompt. These comprehension and assessment tools contain the vocabulary and sentence structures students will need to incorporate in verbal and written responses. Another productive source of requisite vocabulary for a particular narrative selection is the text summary. Reviewing an accurate and articulate summary of a literary text can help teachers decipher words their students should have under their belts approaching related lesson discussions and writing assessments.

Applying Word Selection Criteria to a Narrative Text
Let me offer a practical illustration using the highly anthologized short story "Raymond's Run" by Toni Cade Bambara. Note the words I have highlighted in boldface within the brief, formal text summary. These words categorized below represent essential vocabulary students will need to engage in academic discussion and produce a competent response to text-dependent questions. Less-proficient academic language users will clearly benefit from some conscientious instruction regarding the focal concepts respect, self-respect, and disability and related topic words *rival*, *competitive*, and *peer*. They will be better poised to construct a thoughtful verbal and written response having received explicit guidance on the meaning and use of the high-utility academic words *demonstrate*, *obtain* and *gain* as these three verbs are collocations or frequent word partners for the noun *respect*. The protagonist Hazel demonstrates and obtains respect from her peers, thereby gaining greater self-respect.

Summary: "Raymond's Run" by Toni Cade Bambara
"Raymond's Run" by Toni Cade Bambara is a story about respect and the ways individuals obtain it from peers such as classmates and

siblings. Hazel, a natural, skilled runner, participates in a competitive race and barely beats a new classmate, Gretchen, who has become a social and athletic rival. During the close race, she notices that her mentally disabled brother Raymond is running alongside the fence and keeping pace with her. As the judges decide the actual winner, Hazel realizes that she is so proud of Raymond that winning doesn't matter so much to her. She recognizes that she has many additional ways to excel. Hazel also appreciates Gretchen's running form and professional behavior and begins to admire her. When the judges announce the winner, Gretchen demonstrates respect to her rival with a genuine friendly smile. In so doing, she gains respect from her peers while also developing greater self-respect.

Concluding Remarks

Since word knowledge is such a potent and undisputed predictor of academic achievement, educators across grade levels and content areas cannot afford to leave vocabulary instruction to chance. Students at all proficiency levels look to us for the informed lexical guidance that will allow them to comprehend our lesson content and make vibrant contributions in speech and writing.

Devoting time and attention to selecting words that matter most is the first step in responsible lesson planning. Having established viable lexical priorities, we are better poised to deliver focused and enlightening instruction that reminds us why we elected to become educators.)(

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