

Vocabulary Instruction Tips for Students With and Without Disabilities



Build Curiosity About Words

Try to actively encourage students to look for new words in and out of school. Dedicate a bulletin board to displaying and celebrating new words, have your students add words to personal and class dictionaries, keep a new word jar in your classroom, and write stories a group using the new words your students have learned.



Engage in Interactive Read-Alouds

Read-alouds are important for all students, but especially crucial for learners with more significant disabilities—many of whom struggle with vocabulary because they've had limited access to texts for reading and listening. Be sure to read diverse text types aloud to students and define new words you encounter that may be unfamiliar to your students. Encourage students to talk about the book with you and each other.



Focus on Connections

Start a word web on one wall of your classroom. When your students encounter a new word, have them write it on a small paper plate or Post-It and determine (with assistance from you or their peers, if needed) how the new word can be connected to other words in the web. If the new word is similar in meaning to another word, they can connect the two words with a strand of black yarn. If the new word is an antonym of another word, the connection can be “drawn” with a strand of red yarn.



Select Vocabulary to Teach

Focus on high-utility words that are likely to appear across a variety of academic domains and contexts. Determining which words to teach will depend on your students' existing vocabulary skills. If you teach in an inclusive classroom with students who have significant disabilities, don't assume they have the same vocabulary base as peers without disabilities—some will have more robust vocabulary skills, while other learners may have relatively limited vocabularies.



Tailor Vocabulary Instruction for Students Who Use AAC

Teach students to use the words they do have available on their communication systems to talk about the new words they are learning. (For example, instead of selecting a single word such as escarpment, show your student how to express an understanding of that word by using available words like big, tall, hill, close, and water.) Focus some time each day on improving students' spelling and writing skills, so that one day the students will be able to say whatever words they want using spelling.

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