Using Renaissance Learning Programs to Support Vocabulary Development
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Introduction

The importance of vocabulary

A large body of educational research has confirmed that vocabulary acquisition is an essential part of students’ academic development (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1998b; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Becker, 1977; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Hart & Risley, 1995; Ricketts, Nation & Bishop, 2007). Notable researchers Baker, Simmons, and Kameenui (1998b) have posited that “Learning, as a language based activity, is fundamentally and profoundly dependent on vocabulary knowledge” (p. 183). Indeed, the essence of any pedagogical process is the communication of ideas, and word knowledge contributes to both the receptive skills that allow us to understand others and the expressive skills we use when articulating our own thoughts. A large extent of learning is also dependent on students’ ability to derive meaning from texts—and greater word knowledge leads to better reading comprehension.

Extensive research documenting the importance of vocabulary has led academic standard-setting organizations, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), to likewise emphasize the value of vocabulary in their recommendations. Specifically, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010b) put forth by the CCSSO state that “the importance of students acquiring a rich and varied vocabulary cannot be overstated” (p. 32) and suggest that the following key vocabulary-related factors contribute to students’ college and career readiness:

- The acquisition of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary
- An appreciation for the relationships between words and phrases
- The ability to read complex text

Vocabulary instruction

Although research unequivocally indicates that vocabulary plays an important role in learning, there is less consensus about how vocabulary should be taught. In their research on vocabulary instruction, Baker, Simmons, and Kameenui (1998a) observed that “although vocabulary development pervades every subject from reading to mathematics to physical education, it is difficult to isolate for instructional purposes” (p. 219). There are no universally accepted guidelines or programs for teaching vocabulary, but research generally supports multifaceted approaches that include both direct instruction on specific words (e.g., providing a definition and example) and indirect instruction that includes exposure to rich language and activities for building generative word knowledge (e.g., strategies for independently learning new word meanings). In other words, an effective teaching strategy involves lessons on words needed for academic success that are not typically acquired independently (Nagy & Townsend, 2012), coupled with practices that encourage independent word learning, such as extensive reading (see Anderson & Nagy, 1991).

Vocabulary in Reading

Many researchers and educators have identified reading as an effective means for increasing word knowledge (e.g., Adams, 1990; Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Baumann & Kameenui, 1991; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) concluded, “A most effective way to produce large-scale vocabulary growth is through an activity that is all too often interrupted in the process of reading instruction: Reading” (p. 252). The incidental learning that occurs while students are reading is thought to account for a considerable 25% to 50% of vocabulary acquisition (Nagy, Anderson,
& Herman, 1987). Through reading, students are exposed to new words and have opportunities to further develop their understanding of word meanings. Reading is thought to encourage depth of understanding for vocabulary in a process described well in the CCSS (2010b):

If students are going to grasp and retain words and comprehend text, they need incremental, repeated exposure in a variety of contexts to the words they are trying to learn. When students make multiple connections between a new word and their own experiences, they develop a nuanced and flexible understanding of the word they are learning. In this way, students learn not only what a word means but also how to use that word in a variety of contexts, and they can apply appropriate senses of the word’s meaning in order to understand the word in different contexts. (p. 32)

Indeed, few activities compare to reading with regard to presenting students with new vocabulary and providing opportunities to see how words are used in context.

**Accelerated Reader**
Renaissance Learning’s Accelerated Reader (AR) program facilitates guided independent reading by helping students get the most out of their reading practice. Currently used in tens of thousands of schools, Accelerated Reader helps teachers (1) match students to appropriate books, (2) monitor students’ reading practice, and (3) assess vocabulary acquisition. Within Accelerated Reader, four different types of quizzes are available: Reading Practice, Vocabulary Practice, Literacy Skills, and Other Reading. The Reading Practice and Vocabulary Practice quizzes relate most directly to vocabulary instruction. Reading Practice Quizzes are available to assess reading comprehension for nearly 140,000 books, and are complemented by Vocabulary Practice Quizzes that can be used to test students on the meaning of words found in the books they have read.

**Reading Practice Quizzes**
Whether they have low, typical, or highly developed literacy skills, all students benefit from time spent reading, particularly when the material is at an appropriate level (Squire, 1995). Accelerated Reader helps teachers guide students to appropriate reading material that is challenging, but comprehensible. As a measure of literal comprehension, Reading Practice Quizzes consist of 5, 10, or 20 multiple-choice questions used to determine whether a student has read and understood a book. Questions typically focus on significant events or characters and are presented in an order that matches the chronology of the book. Students receive a score based on the percentage of questions answered correctly, which can be used to judge whether the student is reading at an optimal level.

In the Accelerated Reader program, the optimal reading level at which maximum learning occurs is referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Inspired by Vygotsky’s (1978) influential concept of an instructional zone of proximal development, ZPD relates to a reading range in which the context of a passage can provide a level of understanding beyond what students would achieve were the same information presented in isolation. In a sense, even though the book is read independently, ZPD can be considered a range of reading difficulty in which the text itself provides “instruction,” helping students to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words.

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book is read independently, this can be considered a range of reading difficulty in which the text itself provides “instruction,” helping students to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words. A suggested ZPD is provided in reports generated by the STAR Reading assessment (for more information, see p. 4); however, teachers can also use their professional judgment or grade-equivalent scores from other norm-referenced reading assessments to choose a ZPD range.

ZPD estimates can then be coupled with Accelerated Reader performance feedback to inform decisions about which difficulty levels will benefit students in their reading practice. Students’ ZPDs can be adjusted depending on how well they understand what they are reading; an average score in the range of 85% to 100% on Reading Practice Quizzes indicates students are reading at an optimal level (Paul, 2003).

Of course, ZPD estimates and Reading Practice Quiz feedback should be paired with a teacher’s personal knowledge of each student to create reading practice that will be stimulating, rewarding, and thought provoking. For example, beyond reading at an appropriate level, variations in topic and genre can also be important for learning new vocabulary. The CCSS (2010b) emphasize cross-disciplinary literacy instruction that encourages students to read broadly, with exposure to text of various types, genres, and levels of complexity. To help students and teachers take these numerous factors into account, Renaissance Learning offers a free online search tool called AR BookFinder (see Figure 1; visit http://www.arbookfind.com/) that makes it easy to create personalized book lists based on students’ maturity level, interests, educational needs, and reading ability. When searching for books, users can sort by topic (e.g., history) and subtopic (e.g., colonial period), as well as by ATOS book levels (i.e., a quantitative measure of text difficulty) within their ZPD range.

In addition to recommending a broad range in students’ reading repertoire, the CCSS (2010b) also urge students to read more informational (i.e., nonfiction) texts. Using AR BookFinder, students and teachers can narrow their search to include only fiction or nonfiction titles. Reading Practice Quizzes or Other Reading Quizzes are available for all books found in AR BookFinder, nearly half of which are nonfiction titles.

Furthermore, variations on Reading Practice Quizzes are available to help teachers monitor reading comprehension for all students, including struggling readers or English language learners (ELLs). Recorded Voice Quizzes are available for preliterate and emergent readers who might have understood a low-level book but would have trouble accurately reading and comprehending questions on a typical Reading Practice Quiz. Also, Spanish Quizzes are available for use with Spanish bilingual, ESL, ELL, and Spanish language learning students.
**Vocabulary Practice Quizzes**

As a supplement to Reading Practice Quizzes, Vocabulary Practice Quizzes can be used to gain a sense of a student’s command of vocabulary words encountered while reading (see Figure 2). The process for Vocabulary Practice Quizzes is consistent with research indicating that effective vocabulary instruction couples definitional information with multiple exposures to new words in different contexts (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986), and focuses on functional words that are needed to understand the text or are likely to be encountered often (Stahl, 1986). First, students print a vocabulary list (which may consist of 5, 10, or 15 words) for a book. Each list includes words that are within or above the ATOS book level, appear in the book at least twice, are significant to the book’s meaning, and are useful in everyday conversation. Then, students review the vocabulary list prior to reading the book, encounter the words in context while reading, and review the list again upon finishing the book. (Students must first pass the Reading Practice Quiz for a book before taking its Vocabulary Practice Quiz.) As students read more books, each Vocabulary Practice Quiz includes words from the vocabulary list printed for the most recent book, as well as review words from previously read books. Vocabulary Practice Quiz performance is summarized in Accelerated Reader reports, such as the Words Learned Report (see Figure 3), to help teachers monitor and individualize vocabulary instruction.

**STAR Reading Enterprise**

Another tool that can assist with vocabulary instruction is STAR Reading Enterprise, a computer-adaptive assessment used for screening, progress monitoring, and instructional planning based on skills mastery. STAR Reading Enterprise is the only assessment statistically linked to a research-based learning progression, referred to as Core Progress for reading, which provides educators with information about students’ progress through a sequence of learning so that they can identify knowledge gaps, differentiate instruction, and determine next steps. More specifically, Core Progress identifies the intermediate steps and prerequisite skills needed to reach the levels of expertise identified in the CCSS (2010b), beginning with emergent reading and progressing to college and career readiness.

Core Progress for reading consists of 36 skill areas which fall into one of five domains. Although many of these skills relate in some way to vocabulary acquisition, the domain of Word Knowledge and Skills, for example, encompasses skills related directly to vocabulary knowledge (e.g., understanding synonyms, homonyms, idioms) and strategy (e.g., using context clues and structural analysis). Using the STAR Enterprise Instructional Planning Report, teachers can identify the level of mastery of grade-level vocabulary skills within the Core Progress learning progression, as well as which skills students
are prepared to learn next. Within the Core Progress portal, teachers can search for specific skills, and map prerequisites—both of which include aligned lesson plans (see example, Figure 4).

**Vocabulary in Mathematics**

Though broad and frequent reading is a key means for building vocabulary, even advanced readers will need additional instruction as they encounter new vocabulary in math settings. The simultaneous challenge and importance associated with mathematics vocabulary is reflected well in Monroe and Panchyshyn’s (1995) assertion that “because mathematics material is so difficult to read, ‘with more concepts per word, per sentence, and per paragraph than any other area’ (Schell, 1982, p. 544), it is particularly crucial to emphasize vocabulary instruction in this content area” (p. 80). Becoming familiar with the terms and expressions used in mathematics has been likened to learning a new language (Wakefield, 2000). To complicate matters, students are presented with few opportunities for learning mathematical language; it is usually not part of their experiences outside of the classroom, meaning that incidental learning is not as likely. Students need to make a deliberate effort to learn the basic vocabulary of mathematics in order to develop overall mathematical competency.

Monroe and Panchyshyn (1995) proposed four types of vocabulary to consider in teaching mathematics. *Technical vocabulary* relates to concepts specific to mathematics that are difficult or impossible to express in everyday language (e.g., trapezoid). Each term has one meaning that can often be defined only by using other technical terms, making these words difficult to learn. *Subtechnical vocabulary* includes terms with multiple meanings highly dependent on context (e.g., volume of a cube versus volume of a song), making them difficult to conceptualize and perhaps even more challenging than technical terms. *General vocabulary* is everyday language; however, a large portion of the general vocabulary used in mathematics textbooks often does not overlap with the vocabulary encountered in other reading materials. *Symbolic vocabulary* includes non-alphabet elements such as numerals (e.g., 1, 2), abbreviations (e.g., lbs. instead of pounds), and functions (e.g., x, /, +), which are often encountered only in mathematics and are highly dependent on context.

Mastering mathematic vocabulary is further complicated by the way in which these types of mathematical vocabulary are presented. Mathematical text is thought to be more conceptually dense than most other types of text students interact with (Wiig & Semel, 1984). A lot of information is generally presented using very little text, magnifying the importance of understanding each word. Also, mathematical problems are often presented in context, such as with word problems, meaning that students need both reading comprehension skills and mathematical vocabulary knowledge in order to succeed.
Accelerated Math
To help students overcome the challenges associated with mathematical vocabulary, Accelerated Math Enterprise includes a Math Glossary (see Figure 5). Combining text and audio, and in some cases animation, definitions are available for more than 400 terms, making the glossary comprehensive, appealing, and accessible even to those with low reading levels. Using the glossary, students can build conceptual knowledge and understanding of key math terms. The glossary can be accessed through Renaissance Home Connect,1 so students can look up terms using any computer.

Accelerated Math also supports the use and development of mathematical vocabulary through printed descriptions of objectives on assignments and reports (see Figure 6). Furthermore, Accelerated Math Best Practices encourage mathematical discourse in the classroom and emphasize how important math vocabulary—as well as general vocabulary used to relate math problems in context—is for achieving a sound conceptual understanding of mathematics.

1 Renaissance Home Connect allows parents and students to log in to a website to view progress and current assignments in Accelerated Reader, Accelerated Math, and MathFacts in a Flash.
Focusing on English Language Learners and Struggling Readers

English language learners represent the fastest growing segment of the student population (Kindler, 2002; Lachat, 2004), with 77% of these students speaking Spanish as their first language (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003). Similar to their native English speaking classmates, a primary source of reading comprehension difficulties for ELLs is poor vocabulary knowledge (Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010). Vocabulary acquisition is a key factor in learning the English language, which in turn is vital for success in every area of academics, for “nothing less than learning itself depends on language” (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1998b, p. 183). Research indicates that ELLs tend to be about 2 years behind native English speakers in vocabulary knowledge (Biemiller, 2007). Their vocabulary acquisition, however, follows a similar sequence (Biemiller, 2005), meaning that once ELLs have a basic grasp of the English language, they will likely benefit from the same instructional practices used with low-vocabulary native English speakers.

**English in a Flash**

Renaissance Learning developed English in a Flash as a computerized system for promoting English language acquisition focused on vocabulary development for use with struggling students, including ELLs. This structured program provides students with the supplemental practice and repetition needed to acquire core vocabulary and basic grammatical skills. Because understanding words (i.e., receptive learning) generally proceeds being able to effectively use them (i.e., productive learning) (Griffin, 1992), English in a Flash uses audio and visual displays to promote listening comprehension skills, the learning of phonics, and phonemic awareness.

English in a Flash was designed to be used 15 minutes per day, 5 days per week, as students gradually work their way through a series of 15 chapters within three libraries. Each chapter explicitly teaches 90 words, the optimum number for maximum retention given the number of repetitions, mode of presentation, and word difficulty (Crothers & Suppes, 1967).

Students begin English in a Flash by taking a pretest to determine the words they know and do not know. After the pretest, they can begin the progression of 15-minute, 90-word chapters designed to teach the English sound system, vocabulary, and base phrasal structures. Each word is presented on the computer screen and pronounced by five different native English speakers to help learners develop robust phonemic categories (Lively, Logan, & Pisoni, 1993; Logan, Lively, & Pisoni, 1991; Manguson, Yamada, Tokhura, Pisoni, & Bradlow, 1995). Simultaneous orthographic, phonological, and semantic information is presented to promote a deeper understanding of each word for better long-term retention (see Figure 7). The chapters are presented over a series of 5 days to couple spaced instruction with intensified repetition, an important aspect of effective second-language instruction (Bahrick, Bahrick, Bahrick & Bahrick, 1993; Bloom & Shuell, 1981).

**Figure 7: Sample English in a Flash Screens**

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“Nothing less than learning itself depends on language.”

(Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1998b, p. 183)
After each lesson, students complete a short assessment. This system of continuous practice and feedback—together with specific feedback from the program in the form of reports detailing Words Correct and Words to Study (see Figure 8)—visually shows students the progress they are making in vocabulary development. Performance feedback is an important part of the learning process that instills confidence in students so they feel comfortable using new vocabulary in various settings. Information about student progress also helps instructors accurately estimate each student's ability in order to provide personalized instruction and effective interventions.

Students using English in a Flash are able to apply their new vocabulary knowledge to reading with the help of Accelerated Reader. For each English in a Flash library, AR offers a corresponding list of books that contain the vocabulary they have recently learned (searchable under Topic in AR BookFinder).

Successful Reader
Building upon Accelerated Reader as the foundation of a structured program for struggling readers, Renaissance Learning developed the research-based Successful Reader reading intervention (Farr & Munroe, 2009). Designed for use in grades 4 through 12, Successful Reader is available in three levels (upper elementary, middle grades, and secondary), and focuses on two key skill areas—vocabulary and comprehension. A daily Instructional Book Club format integrates professionally narrated audio books, student workbooks, key skills instruction, book discussions, informal writing, and guided independent reading practice.

Each daily session begins with 30 minutes spent in Instructional Book Club, where students listen to audio recordings of high-interest titles and spend time reading along, thinking about, and discussing the texts as a group. This component of Successful Reader provides access to higher-level literature than what struggling readers would typically encounter while reading independently, helping to build their vocabulary, motivation, and confidence. Following Instructional Book Club, students are encouraged to apply their new skills to self-selected literature and spend 30-60 minutes engaging in guided independent reading practice (Paul, 2003). As the class finishes each book club text, they participate in a review session before comprehension is assessed using Reading Practice Quizzes.

There are usually large discrepancies in the amount of free reading done by good readers versus poor readers (Allington, 1983; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). Students in the 90th percentile for independent reading volume read an average of 2,357,000 words per year, whereas students in the 10th percentile only
read 8,000 words per year (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding). Cunningham and Stanovich (2001) translated this finding with dramatic effect, when they concluded that “the entire year’s out-of-school reading for the child at the 10th percentile amounts to just two days reading for the child at the 90th percentile” (p. 141). Similarly, a lack of independent reading, the absence of strategies for learning words from context, and diffuse word knowledge have been cited as critical obstacles to vocabulary development for students with disabilities (Stahl & Shiel, 1999). Because they have smaller initial vocabularies and fewer word-learning strategies to draw upon, direct instruction plays an especially important role for struggling readers’ vocabulary acquisition. As stated in the CCSS (2010b), “New words and phrases are acquired not only through reading and being read to but also through direct vocabulary instruction and (particularly in the earliest grades) through purposeful classroom discussions around rich content” (p. 28).

Aspects of Successful Reader, such as Instructional Book Club and guided independent reading practice time, help to negate a potential “Matthew effect” for students with poor reading skills. Coined by Stanovich (1986), the Matthew effect reflects observations that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” in vocabulary acquisition and other aspects of reading. There is a reciprocal relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary: Having a big vocabulary contributes to being a better reader, but being a good reader also contributes to a better vocabulary. Building on knowledge and skills acquired through reading, good readers tend to become better and better. Poor readers, however, spiral in the opposite direction. Lacking knowledge and general reading skills, struggling readers tend to read less and get less out of what they do read, causing them to fall further and further behind. Successful Reader keeps these vulnerable students reading and takes advantage of the fact that children can learn words as efficiently from having stories read to them as they can from reading themselves (Stahl, Richek, & Vandevier, 1991). Successful Reader practices are also consistent with professional guidance offered by Professor of Education William Nagy (2005) for encouraging vocabulary acquisition in students who are poor readers:

> The need for exposure to rich language is especially acute for older, less able readers—students who tend to have limited vocabularies. It is unlikely that these students will (or can) read widely enough to make a difference in their vocabulary growth. Although increasing such students’ ability and motivation to read is essential, teachers must also find ways to use oral language as a means of increasing their vocabularies. Effective use of discussion is perhaps the most important tool, but reading aloud to older students should not be ruled out. (p 29)

The structured vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction included in Successful Reader benefits ELLs in similar ways as struggling native English speaking students. Like English in a Flash, Successful Reader involves auditory elements (e.g., audio books and discussions) that expose students to new vocabulary in context and model correct pronunciation. Furthermore, auditory elements are paired with interactive activities (e.g., group discussions and monitored workbook responses) that provide a supportive setting to help students make the difficult, but important, step from receptive to productive language skills (see Figure 9).
Research indicates that ELLs are often comparable to native English speakers in word-level skills (e.g., decoding, word recognition, spelling), but lacking in reading comprehension and writing skills. Thus, programs that incorporate literacy instruction and promote oral language development in English are thought to be especially important for ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Lesaux, Crosson, Kieffer, & Pierce, 2010).

Students can begin using Successful Reader while still working in English in a Flash. The program provides guidance for teachers about Instructional Book Club texts that contain vocabulary they have recently learned—beginning as soon as students have completed English in a Flash Library 2.

**Accelerated Math**

Accelerated Math offers struggling students and ELLs vocabulary support with both low-frequency words used in math practice and technical terms specific to mathematics. For low-frequency words, Accelerated Math provides Vocabulary Word Lists (see Figure 10) that define the general (non-mathematical) words used in Accelerated Math problems with simple, contextual explanations using words taught in English in a Flash. Using these lists, students with smaller vocabularies can successfully solve the word problems presented in Accelerated Math while also expanding their English vocabulary.

For technical vocabulary specific to mathematics, students can benefit from the Math Glossary in Accelerated Math Enterprise (for more information, see p. 6), which is consistent with CCSS (2010a) recommendations that math instruction with ELLs include multiple modes. Also, Accelerated Math Best Practices reflect the recommendations for how math instruction should be structured for ELLs as stated in the *Application of Common Core State Standards for English Language Learners*.

Regular and active participation in the classroom—not only reading and listening but also discussing, explaining, writing, representing, and presenting—is critical to the success of ELLs in mathematics. Research has shown that ELLs can produce explanations, presentations, etc., and participate in classroom discussions as they are learning English. (p. 2)

Use of the Vocabulary Word Lists and Math Glossary can provide the extra scaffolding students need to participate in major vocabulary-building activities, such as discussion and interaction surrounding mathematics content.

**STAR Reading Spanish**

Beginning in the 2012–2013 school year, STAR Reading Spanish will be added to Renaissance Learning’s suite of standardized computer-adaptive assessments. It can be used to assess how well Spanish-speaking students read in Spanish, with item difficulty levels ranging from beginning-of-first-grade to end-of-fifth-grade reading levels (see Figure 11). Because ELLs who are literate in their first language tend to more readily acquire literacy in a second language (Fitzgerald, 1995; Garcia, 1998), using STAR Reading Spanish to assess students’ Spanish reading levels will help instructors to better anticipate the skills students are likely to transfer from Spanish to English literacy and to place students into appropriate groups for instruction. In addition, STAR Reading Spanish facilitates students’ reading practice. Using students’ Spanish zone of
proximal development (SP ZPD), teachers and students can search for Spanish-language books at the right reading level in AR BookFinder (http://www.arbookfind.com) and then monitor students’ comprehension of these books with Spanish Quizzes in Accelerated Reader. As students work with English in a Flash and Successful Reader and their mastery of English grows, they can transfer their skills to reading and quizzing on books in English and teachers can monitor their progress with STAR Reading Enterprise.

**Conclusion**

The interconnectedness between vocabulary, learning, and overall student achievement is both well documented in the research literature and emphasized in influential educational standards (e.g., CCSS, 2010b). Because word knowledge plays a pivotal role in effective communication, students’ vocabulary skills affect every aspect of their learning experience. By helping expand vocabulary knowledge, teachers can feel confident they are helping build the basic skills students need to be successful in any academic endeavor.

Strategies for building student vocabulary are woven throughout Renaissance Learning products. We offer many programs that help the general population of students increase their word knowledge, as well as special tools tailored to offer extra support for low-achieving students and ELLs. Renaissance Learning offerings that relate to vocabulary often are used in conjunction or otherwise complement each other, giving teachers options for comprehensively monitoring and encouraging word knowledge in their students.

**Figure 11: STAR Reading Spanish Item**

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Había tanta gente en la plaza que era difícil _____ su número exacto.

1. adaptar
2. calcular
3. dividir
4. vincular
References


