Ways to WIN at Vocabulary Learning

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Have you wondered how to fit vocabulary instruction into comprehension instruction? The WIN approach provides three morphological strategies to support vocabulary learning within texts.

The Common Core State Standards suggest integrating vocabulary and academic language instruction within texts. This gives teachers the opportunity to teach comprehension while preparing students to deal with the words present in texts—up to 200,000 different words and 88,000 word families (Anglin, 1993; Nagy & Anderson, 1984). Given this context, this teaching tip describes an approach for students and teachers to WIN at vocabulary learning by focusing on the role of morphology in conveying word meanings in academic texts.

Why Morphology?

Morphology can be an important tool for vocabulary learning (Nagy, Carlisle, & Goodwin, 2014). Most words in academic texts are built from units of meaning (i.e., root words and affixes; Anglin, 1993; Graves, 2007; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Examples include content-specific words like equation, equidistant, formulate, hemisphere, landlocked, informative, and transcontinental. These words have meanings that are important to learning in content areas like science and social studies.

Morphological instruction can support vocabulary learning (for an overview, see Bowers, Kirby, & Deacon, 2010; Goodwin & Ahn, 2010, 2013), and multiple studies suggest supports as part of comprehension or academic language instruction. For example, teaching affixes within textbook-based social studies lessons (Baumann, Edwards, Boland, OleJNIK, & Kame’enui, 2003) and integrating morphological analysis into academic vocabulary instruction that involves reading informational texts (Lesaux, Kieffer, Kelley, & Harris, 2014) have been shown to improve vocabulary learning and/or comprehension compared to typical instruction. The WIN approach was developed based on these findings.

In the next sections, we organize this teaching tip to show how to apply WIN in the classroom. Because WIN should be used when needed, we first identify considerations of word difficulty that can guide WIN implementation. Next, we illustrate how WIN can be integrated into comprehension instruction. This acknowledges the emphasis of the Common Core on combining such instruction with texts. Lastly, we discuss the three strategies in WIN that can provide a general framework to use to help students figure out unknown words within texts.

Considering Word Difficulty in WIN

Part of a strategic approach like WIN involves using the approach in different intensities depending on word difficulty. Research suggests that words that are less frequent and words that are made of units of meaning that are less frequent or that are hidden by spelling and sound changes tend to be more difficult (Carlisle & Katz, 2006; Goodwin, Gilbert, Cho, & Kearns, 2014). For example, in our work with 215 middle school students, 90% got movement right versus 18% for provision. Students’ thoughts on these words are shown in Figure 1. Likely because of its transparency, high frequency, and large family, stu-
students seemed to focus on connections to the root word *move* when asked to produce morphological relatives for *movement*. In contrast, spelling and pronunciation changes between *provision* and its root word, *provide*, resulted in students breaking down *provision* into smaller yet inaccurate parts like *prov*, *provis*, *provis*, *provisi*, and *visions*. Instructionally, this means that WIN must be applied strategically, with both the intensity and the particular strategies used dependent on the words being learned. Words
like provision would require more instruction than movement.

Integrating WIN Into Text Instruction
While reading, students can use the mnemonic WIN to support vocabulary learning (see Figure 2). W stands for word solving, which involves finding smaller meaningful units within bigger words. I stands for in another word, which involves looking for those units in another word that students know. N stands for notice the context. As Nagy and Townsend (2012) note, “Often, students do not get support with the connected text that houses academic vocabulary, despite the fact that the vocabulary is most meaningful when it is used within the language of the discipline” (p. 93). Therefore, an important underlying principle of WIN is that it takes place within the reading of academic texts.

The following vignette highlights the integrated nature of vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. Here, fifth graders are reading Rosa (Giovanni, 2006) to learn about the civil rights movement. After the students read aloud in a whisper voice, the teacher directs students’ attention to a particularly important sentence where vocabulary is tied to comprehension. (All names are pseudonyms.)

Teacher: Look at the bottom of the page. “Rosa Parks had taken a courageous stand. The people were ready to stand with her” [p. 22]. What does it mean to be courageous?

Maria: To have courage.

Teacher: What does that mean?

Maria: Maybe to stand up to someone. Not to be afraid.

Other students in the group nod in agreement.

Jasmine: To face your fears.

The teacher writes students’ responses on the board. She then probes further the connection between courageous and the text’s meaning.

Teacher: So what does that tell us about Rosa? Share with a partner.

The partner pair of Maria and Jasmine make the connection and share it with the group: “It takes a lot of courage to face your fears so we can stand up for what we believe in, and that is what Rosa was doing there.”

As this vignette shows, building word knowledge via morphological instruction like WIN can be critical to supporting comprehension.

Specific Components of WIN and Examples
As discussed, WIN uses a mnemonic to communicate three morphological strategies that our work (Goodwin, 2016; Goodwin & Perkins, 2015) and the work of others (Bowers et al., 2010; Goodwin & Ahn, 2010, 2013) have found to be particularly helpful. In this section, we provide an instructional example of each strategy. We purposely do not use the same target word with each strategy because WIN should be applied as needed. If, for example, applying the W strategy solves the vocabulary learning challenge, teachers and students can use the I and N strategies as time permits.

In the following example, students and their teacher are using the smaller unit pleasant to figure out the meaning of the larger word pleasantries, which is used to set the tone for Rosa’s historic bus ride. This example highlights the use of the W strategy: Word solve to find smaller units within bigger words.

Teacher: All right, so everybody take a sticky note, go ahead and write the word pleasantries on it, and let’s see if you can word solve it. Before you do, remind me: What does it mean to word solve?

Students: To break the word down.

Teacher: And when we break it down, we find?

Students: The word that we know!

Figure 2
Top Secret Strategies to WIN at Word Learning

Top Secret Strategies to

• WORD SOLVE: Find smaller units within bigger words.

• IN ANOTHER WORD: Use a big word to define smaller units in other words.

• NOTICE THE CONTEXT: Does this definition make sense? Can I use the word and meaning in my own life?

at Word Learning!
Students mark familiar units within *pleasantries* on their sticky notes. Next, the teacher collects and posts students’ sticky notes on the board.

Teacher: OK, it looks like everybody found pleasant in *pleasantries*. Very cool. That’s the root word, so we know it has something to do with...

James: Pleasant!

Teacher: Being pleasant. What does it mean to be pleasant, Mr. James?

James: Happy, nice.

The teacher then finishes this segment by prompting the students to use the word in the context of the story and in the context of their day. She asks them to model Rosa exchanging *pleasantries*, connects that to the tone of the text, and then discusses other times when the students have exchanged *pleasantries* with their friends, sharing examples.

In the example interaction, students were taught the process for using the W strategy and given the language to describe their strategy use. Because of this, in later lessons, students were able to take ownership of it and move to independent application. For example, during the following lesson, students word solved on sticky notes and posted their work during discussion, which made their thinking explicit.

The second strategy in WIN is I, for in another word. Here, students used a big word to define the smaller units in other words in To Space and Back (Ride & Okie, 1986).

Teacher: Midair. That’s a good one. Does anyone see a part of midair that they know?

Students: Air.

Teacher: OK, we all know air. What’s air?

Students respond with motions to the air around them.

Teacher: What’s the other part?

Students: Mid.

Jordan: We know what mid means!

Students: Medium, in the middle.

Teacher: In the middle! How did you figure that out, Jordan?

Jordan: Because it has the base word of middle.

Teacher: This is a great example of this new strategy we’re going to use. Sometimes, we have to look in another word. We use a bigger word like middle to figure out the smaller part. I didn’t know mid, but I knew middle, so I could use middle to figure out mid.

The group returns to the text to replace midair with the new meaning they have created to make sure it makes sense.

This interaction plays on students’ prior knowledge and connects new words to already known words, again shifting the meaning making process to the students. In our study, as students became more familiar with this strategy, student dialogue increased and students began to connect new words to known words in creative and thoughtful ways. Because the students themselves were making the connections, they could not only reproduce them but also explain them in their own words.

The final strategy in WIN, N for notice the context, is shown in each word-solving episode. For N, the teacher and students returned to the text to use the word in the context of the story. As students went back to the story or generalized the meanings of the word to their own lives, they checked their definition to make sure it made sense, and they had the opportunity to apply their newly formed representation. This strategy revealed student misconceptions and continued to shift the responsibility of building word knowledge from the teacher to the student.

Overall, WIN provides an important framework for learning that can be applied strategically within texts based on how hard the word is and what strategy would be most helpful in supporting vocabulary learning.

**REFERENCES**


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