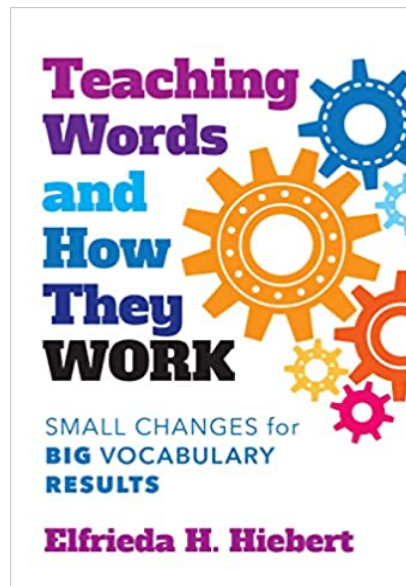# JoLLE@UGA®
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Review of *Teaching Words and How They Work: Small Changes for Big Vocabulary Results*
By Elfrieda H. Hiebert

Reviewer: Harmony Petty

University at Albany, Albany, New York

Recognizing that vocabulary knowledge is essential for reading comprehension, Elfrieda H. Hiebert, president and CEO of TextProject, Inc. and 2008 inductee into the Reading Hall of Fame, provides fresh insight into the relationships between words and how conventional methods of teaching six to eight words per week is not sufficient to address the vocabulary gap. Hiebert's (2020) latest volume, *Teaching Words and How They Work: Small Changes for Big Vocabulary Results,* addresses the complexity and necessity of vocabulary instruction from a pragmatic perspective and offers educators both the opportunity to learn more about the relationships among words and discover practical pedagogical techniques to implement in the classroom.

Chapter 1: Learning Words and How They Work

At the core of Hiebert's method is a generative approach to vocabulary instruction in which students do not learn a reductive list of words each week but rather are taught to pay particular attention to networks of words so that they may generate the meaning of unknown words when they encounter them in texts. Hiebert contends that the digital age and the ability to easily analyze massive volumes of texts and the words therein makes this approach possible. Teaching networks of words through techniques such as semantic mapping allows for the brain to connect new words and their meanings to already known words.

Chapter 2: Small Changes in Vocabulary Instruction

Hiebert recognizes that this approach may constitute a significant shift for teachers in vocabulary instruction methodology, however, she maintains that small changes in instruction can often affect greater changes than large-scale curriculum initiatives. Her belief in the effectiveness of "small changes in vocabulary instruction" is further elucidated by describing four classroom

practices for "big vocabulary results" (p. 13): *conversations*, *collections* of words, *core reading*, and *choice reading*. Hiebert also makes practical suggestions for teachers in how to establish small changes in their vocabulary instruction such as: making a specific goal, attaching to the change to an already existing classroom practice, and ensuring that any required resources are readily available.

Chapters 3 to 7: How Words Work

Following Hiebert's discussion on the importance of her generative approach to vocabulary instruction (Chapter 1) and her pedagogical belief that changes in instruction need not be implemented on a large scale in order to be effective (Chapter 2), chapters 3 to 7 offer various themes on the topic of "how words work". The final two chapters addresses common questions that educators often ask when presented with this approach: how to use current text complexity systems such as the Lexile Framework or Guided Reading Levels in vocabulary instruction (Chapter 8) and how to use this approach with English Language Learners (Chapter 9). Each chapter begins with examples of texts that contain vocabulary related to each chapter's topic and ends with a section entitled "Small Changes = Big Results" in which Hiebert shares stories from teachers who have chosen to implement small changes in their vocabulary instruction in specific ways.

In Chapter 3, "Why a Small Group of Word Families is So Important", Hiebert presents her conceptualization of core vocabulary and demonstrates that while the English dictionary contains over 300,000 main entries and 326,000 sub-entries, the majority of words found in texts come from a "relatively small group of 2,500 word families" (p. 25). Thus, the conventional method of teaching six to eight vocabulary words per week would take 10 years of instruction in order to cover the words that students need to know. Instead,

Hiebert recommends that educators and curriculum developers look to the core vocabulary as a way to close the vocabulary gap "through an economical use of students' time in school" (p. 27). In doing so, she suggests that word families should not be treated as separate word entries but a focus on connections across words should be promoted instead. Furthermore, she argues that vocabulary words should be discussed using semantic maps in which clusters of words are categorized and given meaning and not through the use of rote memorization or worksheets.

Chapter 4, "A Short History of English and Why It Matters", illustrates how understanding the linguistic roots of English words can empower students to generate meanings of unknown words. For example, Hiebert outlines the various contributions to English such as: The Anglo-Saxon foundation, The French Connection, and the use of Greek in producing scientific and technical terms. She explains how the Anglo-Saxons brought monosyllabic root words that are often related to farming, land, water and the countryside; how the French contributed words that were seen as more scholarly and sophisticated and thus are found more often in written texts rather than oral language; and how the scientific revolution in the 16th century led scientists and inventors to use Greek and Latin terms to describe processes and phenomena. Additionally, she expands on this concept by describing how words have been added to the English language in other ways over time such as: Arabic terms for mathematical concepts, the words of indigenous peoples through colonization, and new inventions producing new terms (i.e., cinematography).

In Chapter 5, "Recycling and Remixing: Multiple Meanings and Uses of Words", Hiebert discusses the need for readers to be flexible in monitoring their understanding when they read and the reality that

the root words in the core vocabulary have an average of seven different meanings. Therefore, it is important that educators understand and present to students the two fundamental ways in which words change: Hiebert labels these processes as recycling and remixing. *Recycling* is described as the methods by which word meanings change through: (1) changes in parts of speech (i.e., lap as noun versus as a verb), (2) word meanings morphing (i.e., viral meaning virus or viral meaning information spreading rapidly), and (3) the use of homonyms in which words are spelled the same but have different meanings depending on the context. *Remixing*, however, is the result of mixing words together in order to procure a different meaning, such as in complex, scientific phrases (i.e., water cycle or water table) or through figurative language or idioms.

Chapter 6, "The Vocabulary Networks of Narrative Texts", highlights how quality literature often contains a "rich palette of vocabulary" (p. 69), including rare words, proper names, and unusual words. Furthermore, Hiebert explains how even the core vocabulary words within narrative texts are not always "used in a straightforward manner" (p. 67) but are instead used in figurative phrases such as idioms, metaphors, and similes. As such, the "Small Changes=Big Results" section of this chapter demonstrates how one teacher addressed the complexity of narrative language through *conversations* about rare words, gathering *collections* of unknown words through semantic mapping, drawing attention to figurative language during *core reading*, and by increasing his students' exposure to a variety of genres during *choice reading*.

In chapter 7, "The Vocabulary Networks of Informational Texts", Hiebert presents a short synopsis on how common reading assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have shifted in favor of informational over

narrative texts. To summarize, Hiebert suggests that the recent trends towards informational texts "emanate from the view that building background knowledge is an essential part of the ELA curriculum" (p. 84). However, she argues that it is impossible for students to acquire all the background knowledge needed for future reading comprehension, and thus educators must teach students how to draw on prior knowledge and make connections to already known words. In the "Small Changes=Big Results" section of this chapter, Hiebert highlights a teacher who used classroom *conversations* as an opportunity for students to demonstrate information they have learned from a text, modelled semantic mapping in order to create *collections* of words found in informational texts, and allowed students to develop their own area of expertise through *choice reading* of quality informational trade books.

Chapters 8 and 9: Text Complexity Systems and English Language Learners

Chapters 8 and 9 address commonly asked questions from educators about this generative approach to vocabulary instruction: how to use current text complexity rating systems and how to best use this approach with English Language Learners?

In Chapter 8, "Vocabulary and Text Complexity Systems", Hiebert presents a helpful explanation of text complexity systems, such as Guided Reading Levels and the Lexile Framework, and describes how these systems produce a level that educators then use for determining the text's potential use in reading instruction. However, she also demonstrates how each of these systems fail to address challenging vocabulary in texts, despite research indicating that vocabulary knowledge contributes to reading comprehension. Thus, she argues that teachers should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the current text complexity systems

when using leveled texts in reading and vocabulary instruction.

Chapter 9, "Different Labels but the Same Concepts: English Learners", takes a strengths perspective when considering the unique contributions of English Language Learners. Hiebert contends that ELs bring specific abilities to vocabulary learning such as "metalinguistic awareness, existing labels for concepts in native languages, and cognate knowledge" (p. 114). She expands upon these strengths and argues that teachers use these factors to their advantage in vocabulary instruction. Furthermore, Hiebert presents the need for vocabulary instruction for ELs to intentionally bolster background knowledge and develop ELs' beliefs in their agency as readers.

Final Thoughts

This text is presented through two distinct modes: professional development on the topic of "words and how they work" and practical advice for implementation in the classroom. This dual approach allows for the reader to fully understand the concepts while also considering how to address specific features of this generative vocabulary approach in their instruction. The text includes many exemplars of challenging vocabulary in texts, samples of semantic maps, and tables of suggestions for practical classroom applications. Hiebert's informational and relational tone renders the text an accessible volume for any educator or curriculum director who desires to take an innovative approach to vocabulary instruction. Her belief in "Small Changes=Big Results" encourages readers to make simple, significant, and effective changes in the classroom immediately. As an early childhood educator, I found the text to be helpful for educators of any age group as the recommendations for implementation are practical and generalizable to any grade.