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Vocabulary Assessment to Support Instruction: Building Rich Word-Learning Experiences, 1st Edition. Margaret G. McKeown, Paul D. Deane, Judith A. Scott, Robert Krovetz, and René R. Lawless. The Guilford Press, New York and London (2017). xvii + 254 pp., ISBN: 9781462530793 (paperback).

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Vocabulary is a rich and varied form of one's language knowledge. It is seriously essential for learning, but conventional vocabulary assessments lack the range and flexibility to support classroom teachers in making instructional decisions. This has motivated McKeown and her colleagues, five leading scholars in vocabulary teaching and/or assessment, to try to bridge the gap by developing an informative book. The volume tackles the complex yet crucial topic of linking assessment to instruction in the domain of vocabulary. For decades, the field of education has been unable to meet the challenge of getting meaningful, useful vocabulary assessment into everyday classroom practice in a way that improves reading outcomes.

In this important volume, authors challenge the narrow and simplistic definitions of vocabulary that too often have guided the teaching and assessment of word meanings. They offer a fresh perspective on word learning and describe powerful, precise assessment strategies. They have based their perspective on current research and theory and have a realistic focus on today's learners and classroom practices. Integrating research from multiple disciplines, including linguistics, educational psychology, and educational measurement, the authors advance a multifaceted, nuanced perspective on vocabulary and illustrate how this perspective can guide the next generation of assessments to inform instruction. Guidelines are presented for selecting which words to teach, evaluating the depth and richness of students' word knowledge and their ability to apply it in complex contexts, designing effective instructional practices, and using technology to create adaptive and scalable assessments. As it is mentioned in the preface to the volume, the book is intended for "a diverse audience" (p. xi), that is both general readers and specialists. The user-friendly features of the volume include sample test items, classroom examples, and suggested print and online resources. This excellent resource will be read and reread by all those keen on using the latest findings in literacy development to boost student learning.

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The book is organized around three broad themes of defining the construct of vocabulary discussed in Chapters 1-2, assessment design discussed in Chapters 3-5, and educational impact of vocabulary assessment discussed in Chapters 6-7. It consists of 8 chapters, a glossary, a reference list, and a subject index.

In the first two chapters, the writers try to present the existing definitions of vocabulary in the literature and of course their own new “enhanced vision of the vocabulary construct” (p. 28). Chapter 1 describes the role of vocabulary knowledge in providing key building blocks for learning in many domains (such as reading comprehension, writing, and critical thinking) and frames the problem of how the conventional use of the word vocabulary limits the way vocabulary is taught and assessed. Chapter 2 presents a reconceptualization of the construct of vocabulary, drawing on perspectives from educational psychology, psycholinguistics, computational linguistics, and educational measurement. This framework encompasses multiword expressions and generative language patterns in addition to individual words. The chapter also examines the role of dictionaries in vocabulary learning, showing why they are inadequate for the task.

In the next three chapters, Chapters 3-5, the authors explain how vocabulary should be assessed in terms of both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Chapter 3 surveys the current state of vocabulary assessment, explores the purposes of assessing vocabulary and the constructs that underlie conventional assessments. The limitations of current assessments are pointed out and what is on the horizon in state-of-the-art assessment development is explored. Chapter 4 suggests features of enhanced assessments, such as types of words to include and a variety of item types and modalities. It discusses how to prioritize words and word meanings that should be assessed and presents a rationale for including multiword expressions, patterns of morphology (form and structure of words), and polysemy (multiple meanings of words) in vocabulary assessments. And Chapter 5 presents samples of novel assessment item types and formats for assessing various facets of vocabulary, including partial word knowledge and the ability to apply word knowledge in complex language tasks.

In Chapters 6-7, the writers discuss how teachers can provide effective instruction that will support vocabulary growth for all students to become a nation of word learners and explore some of the technological advances that can facilitate the use of principles presented in the previous chapters. Chapter 6 exemplifies creating word-conscious classroom that includes focused vocabulary instruction and metalinguistic awareness of the generative language patterns. The chapter suggests that this approach can facilitate the type of word learning that the authors are trying to promote throughout their book. Chapter 7 turns to a discussion of the role of technology in creating nonintrusive, adaptive, quick, and scalable assessments. Technological developments can support more effective approaches to vocabulary assessment and instruction. This includes a discussion of dynamic assessments and tutoring systems. However, it is important to note that technology is an “abler”, not a “substitute” for effective teaching.

Finally, Chapter 8 is essentially an annotated bibliography of resources that may be useful to educators, policy-makers, and assessment developers. This includes a list of online resources for ideas for implementing effective vocabulary instruction, sites with tools for learning words, word games and puzzles, language blogs, reference sites specializing in words and word origins, and an annotated bibliography of published children’s literature for use in developing word awareness.

One strength of the volume lies in its elaborate and well-organized explanation of theoretical principles and detailed consideration of practical procedures. Another is that the volume is in fact encyclopedic in terms of vocabulary teaching and vocabulary assessment. Therefore, it can hopefully attract a wide readership among scholars and practitioners in second language teaching and vocabulary assessment such as language testers, practitioners, and researchers. Implicit

suggestions provided for further research throughout chapter discussions, as well as a very clear, straightforward, and well organized format also add to the strength of this invaluable book. Furthermore, the volume has been aptly titled as “Building Rich Word-Learning Experiences”, that is throughout the book the audience meets dozens of vocabulary which is a good opportunity for him or her to review the vocabulary he or she knows, to learn some new words, or to test his or her vocabulary knowledge. Next, throughout the book, the authors offer ample, robust examples of language constructs, assessments, instructional practices, and classroom interactions. They are intended to provide clarity and explanatory power, and to make this volume accessible to a diverse audience. Last, the writers’ contribution to the literature is that they have tried to redemarginalize vocabulary assessment by discussing its significance in many domains of literacy such as reading comprehension, writing, and critical thinking, an issue which was pioneered long ago by Read (2000) and then resumed by Daller, Milton, and Treffers-Daller (2007).

However, the volume needs a proof-reading to sort out trivial issues. In Chapter 1, it may be suggested that the writers first define the concept of vocabulary and then discuss its significance for literacy. It can be also suggested that the writers use the terminology existing in the linguistic and testing literature although they have stipulated their own definition. For example, when they refer to tacit morphological knowledge, they mean pragmatic (= functional and sociocultural) knowledge as used by Backman and Palmer (1996). The book is in fact a report on the findings of papers presented at a conference held in the U.S. and if the authors intend to generalize their findings to other educational settings, they are daringly suggested to include studies from other educational settings, too.

References

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