



# Developing Vocabulary Knowledge in the Immersion Classroom

by *Teresa A. Belisle, 5th Grade Teacher*  
*Normandale French Immersion School, Edina, Minnesota*

*Lesson Plan Inside*

Vocabulary acquisition is a key component to successfully developing communication and literacy skills. Developing a rich vocabulary is a top priority and an on-going challenge for both L1 and L2 instruction. Whereas L1 students arrive at school with a command of 2,000 to 6,000 words, most immersion students begin their academic experience at point zero. Once in the academic setting, immersion students are exposed to a great amount of vocabulary in a myriad of subject areas. They are required to use a fair amount of vocabulary throughout the day, acquiring a much larger vocabulary in the target language than students in traditional L2 learning settings. Yet, due to the intense focus on content in the immersion setting and a lack of systematic vocabulary instruction, most immersion students' vocabulary knowledge is insufficient for quality, age-appropriate expression, and literacy development in the upper elementary and secondary levels. This lack of a much larger active and passive vocabulary impacts two vital areas of their academic endeavors: a limited active vocabulary makes it difficult for students to express higher level complex thoughts, opinions, or concepts; and limited passive vocabularies make it difficult for students to comprehend age-appropriate or subject-appropriate readings in the immersion language.

In this article, specific research findings and hypotheses concerning three major challenges to multidimensional vocabulary instruction are summarized. Next, possible frameworks for organizing classroom activities are given. A sample plan of action is then proposed for vocabulary instruction for Grade 5 early French immersion students in one thematic unit.

## The Complexity of Vocabulary Learning and Teaching

Researchers and theorists have pointed to the fact that vocabulary knowledge is multi-faceted, “a disarmingly simple term for a complex multidimensional phenomenon” (Harley, 1996). Due to this complexity, classroom teachers must take a more comprehensive approach to vocabulary development in order for students to reach a higher quality and quantity of L2 output (Swain, 1996; Sanaoui, 1996). There are three facets of this complexity: (a) receptive versus productive vocabularies, (b) breadth versus depth of vocabularies, and (c) direct teaching versus contextual inferencing.

### *Receptive vs. Productive*

One seemingly obvious duality of vocabulary knowledge is the receptive-versus-productive capacity of the L2 learner. Receptive vocabulary refers to the words and expressions students can understand when reading or hearing them. Productive vocabulary refers to the words and expressions that the students can use correctly when producing oral or written language. Both capacities need to be developed to communicate effectively.

Paribakht and Wesche (1996) adapted the Gass (1988) framework for language acquisition to the realm of vocabulary development. The framework specifies the stages of vocabulary acquisition from first exposure to output:

1. *Apperceived input* is when students are made to “notice” the vocabulary and then connect it to past learning.
2. *Comprehended input* is similar to Krashen’s “comprehensible input” but goes a step further in assuring that the student has understood it.
3. *Intake* is when the student uses the vocabulary in various situations.
4. *Integration* is the internalization of the new vocabulary.
5. *Output* is the use of the lexical items in the student’s production.

This hierarchical framework clearly delineates the middle processes needed to move students from the receptive stage to the productive stage. It is imperative that repeated exposure and manipulation of the vocabulary be available for the student to internalize and in turn produce newly acquired vocabulary.

### ***Depth vs. Breadth***

A second dimensional facet to vocabulary acquisition, which is key to quality language development, is depth of knowledge. Depth of vocabulary deals not only with meaning, but with morphology, phonology, syntax, sociolinguistic aspects, differences between written and spoken uses, and strategies for approaching unknown words.

As teachers approach the challenge of teaching depth of vocabulary across the curriculum, it is helpful to look at continua of vocabulary knowledge. Wesche and Paribakht (1996) make reference to Cronbach’s categories of increasing knowledge of words developed in 1942, which are:

1. *Generalization*: being able to define the word
2. *Application*: selecting an appropriate use of the word
3. *Breadth of meaning*: recalling the different meanings of the word
4. *Precision of meaning*: applying the word correctly to all possible situations
5. *Availability*: being able to use the word productively.

In looking at this continuum it becomes clear that too often, students are given the message that learning vocabulary only involves the very first level of word knowledge. Teachers need to make a conscious effort to create activities that allow students to develop their vocabulary to the highest level.

A second continuum to which Wesche and Paribakht (1996) make reference is Taylor’s Categories of Knowledge. The categories are not hierarchical, but are key aspects of full vocabulary knowledge. Taylor’s categories are as follows:

1. *Frequency of occurrence*
2. *Word register*
3. *Word collocation*
4. *Word morphology*
5. *Word semantics*
6. *Word polysemy and the relationship of sound to spelling*
7. *Knowledge of the equivalent of the word in the mother tongue*

These two continua give a more comprehensive view of vocabulary knowledge than has traditionally been considered by second language instructors. To effectively develop depth of vocabulary knowledge, we need to use a checklist similar to Taylor’s to plan classroom activities that address all lexical components.

## ***Direct Teaching vs. Contextual Inferencing***

The emphasis of most teachers' vocabulary instruction entails one main tactic—encouraging students to glean meaning from context. “Current pedagogical trends emphasize incidental or indirect learning by resorting to contextual cues” (Duquette & Painchaud, 1996, p. 143). Krashen professes that vocabulary is best learned through reading and that other vocabulary teaching approaches are not effective. “There is growing evidence to suggest, however, that inferring the meaning of new vocabulary in context is a lengthy and error-prone undertaking, which by itself is an inefficient way of mastering second language vocabulary” (Raptis, 1997). Incidental learning is one way to acquire lexical knowledge, but it may be ineffective or inefficient. Morrison (1996) cites Haastруп, who claims that L2 learners need to reach a certain “threshold level” before they are able to use effective inferencing procedures.

Guessing from context is not always possible, due to the learner's limited ability but also due to varied text construction. Texts range drastically in contextual quality. Due to the reality that students will encounter texts that are not context rich, teachers must offer both contextualized and decontextualized vocabulary learning activities.

Explicit instruction must also be planned for developing students' productive skills. Due to years of being encouraged to “just get the gist,” immersion students become very comfortable with ambiguity. Students must be pushed to accurately use the target words in context (Swain, 1996). Lyster (1996, 1997) has clearly shown the power of various modes of error correction. Without such correction, immersion students will reach eighth grade and still be producing far from native-like language (Lyster, 1987, Swain, 1984). Unplanned, explicit correcting of lexical errors needs to happen consistently in the classroom.

## **Teaching Techniques**

The need for systematic, integrated vocabulary instruction for second language learners has been established by both researchers and teachers. Swain and Carroll (1987) developed a descriptive classification of vocabulary related instructional activities which serve as a good first step to such instruction.

**1. Planned/Unplanned.** There is a need for both planned and unplanned instruction. Planned instruction involves deciding what lexical knowledge you will teach. What are the content-obligatory lexical items to be taught? What are the content-compatible items which could be taught? What is the linguistic objective? Do you want them to reach the productive stage? Will you teach related words—which ones? Also, teachers need to plan for enriching the input, which will serve as a constant supply of synonyms for the students. Extensive planned instruction needs to be developed, but teachers also need to be open to unplanned lexical instruction which naturally arises from student need and interest.

**2. Systematic/Haphazard.** Examples of systematic instruction are weekly word lists, routine ways of increasing the depth of knowledge of new lexical items, and systematic activities to move students from the receptive to the productive stage.

**3. Written/Oral input.** There is a need for both forms of input during instruction. This dual input increases the likelihood of reaching different learning styles, but also addresses important sociolinguistic aspects such as differences in register.

**4. Building on prior knowledge in L1 and L2.** Teachers need to plan how to recycle previously studied vocabulary to teach new items and reuse words in a variety of contexts. (Thematic-based instruction lends itself to this strategy.) They can conduct metacognitive discussions about L1/L2 differences. Wright (1996) found such metacognitive discussions both helpful and motivating for the students. “They indicated during discussions that they had not thought about differences between their first and second languages, and were not aware that they could be making errors by assuming that the two languages were always congruent” (p. 274). Peer think-aloud discussions are also useful. Morrison

(1996) found that students felt that verbalizing their thought process helped them because they had to explain and justify their vocabulary knowledge.

**5. Focus on meaning/Focus on formal features of words.** Plan to teach multiple meanings of words and how various words fit together.

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## Plan of Action

The implementation of good ideas, hypotheses, or proven methods is an on-going challenge for all teachers. The immersion teacher is even more taxed in this area since so little ready-made quality material exists for the immersion setting. Taking into account the information summarized in this article, a preliminary, skeletal plan of action for implementation in a Grade 5 immersion classroom follows.

**Objective:** Explicit, systematic, sequenced instruction for increasing students vocabulary depth and productive skills within the theme of Inventions.

**Integrated thematic unit:** Inventions (science: force and motion, simple machines; language arts: biographies).

**Vocabulary:** The table below is a list of sets of lexical areas to be developed. A specific item list in French is available from the author for interested readers.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Content-obligatory</b>	<b>Content-compatible</b>
<b>Science:</b> <b>Simple machines</b>  <b>Force and motion</b>	<i>Simple machines— lever, pulley, incline plane</i>  <i>Force and motion—force, motion, fluid flow, mechanical advantage</i>	<i>Verbs of motion, common tools, common machines, description (form-adjectives and nouns, dimension, qualities, location-prepositions), idiomatic expressions</i>
<b>Language arts:</b> <b>Biography</b>	<i>Inventor, invention, product, patent, transformation, need, cause and effect, alter, adapt, design, methods</i>	<i>Descriptive words, expressions: physical, emotional, intellectual, characteristics</i>

### Planning: What to teach?

#### Swain's Categories—

1. *Planned.* List of content-obligatory, content-compatible vocabulary; list of descriptive words by register
2. *Systematic.* Word lists, Reading plus Treatment, Taylor's categories
3. *Written/Oral.* All activities will provide both.
4. *Prior knowledge.* Adjective agreement, placement (difference between L1/ L2)
5. *Focus on meaning.* Production—Inventors' Fair. Create poster and present it.

## NOTES

**Taylor’s List (to increase vocabulary depth of knowledge)—**

1. *Frequency of occurrence*: Synonym lists—descriptive words
2. *Word register*: Idioms, informal vs. formal for descriptive words and tools
3. *Word collocation*: Tools + verb; adjective position
4. *Word morphology*: Create word families
5. *Word semantics*: Personalized semantic web
6. *Equivalent of the word in the mother tongue*: Bilingual picture dictionary for tools

**Paribakht and Wesche Framework (to increase productive skills)—**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Activities</b>	
	<b>Science</b>	<b>Biographies</b>
1. <i>Apperceived input</i>	<i>KWL—inventions descriptions of inventions</i>	<i>KWL—famous people biographical sketches</i>
2. <i>Comprehended input</i>	<i>Pictionary, tinker center Timeline</i>	<i>Who’s who game Timeline</i>
3. <i>Intake</i>	<i>Partner: family web</i>	<i>Class generated lists Description categories</i>
4. <i>Integration</i>	<i>Informal/Formal</i>	<i>Synonym lists</i>
5. <i>Output</i>	<i>Description of own invention</i>	<i>Day of the notables</i>

**Brief Descriptions of Activities**

● **KWL (already Know; Want to find out; what did you Learn?)**. Before beginning our study, students indicate what they already know about inventions and famous people and what they would like to learn during our five-week unit. This will not only activate their prior learning, but it will give us an established list of words they need to talk about the theme. The generation of this list will begin at the partner level, then table level, and finally we will produce a class cumulative list. At the end of the unit, they will add what they learned.

● **Descriptions of inventions/biographical sketches**. Students will skim and scan authentic texts on inventions and famous people for words from our previously generated KWL list, and they will add to the list, determining synonyms, antonyms, related words, and word collocations.

● **Class-generated lists, categories**. Based on the list of words students have generated in the KWL and experienced in context through the skim and scan exercise, we will do a classification activity. This would be set up as a jigsaw activity. The expert groups would be responsible for creating a

comprehensive list and for teaching that list (and its patterns) to the others. The categories would be adjectives, nouns, verbs, and prepositions.

● **Partner family web.** Each week we will choose a key word in our study. With a partner, students are to try and create a web of words from that same family. Friday we will find out who found the most words—they show and justify their web to the class. This presentation would be supplemented by a mini-lesson by the teacher.

● **Simple machines informal/formal book.** As a class we will write and publish a class book on simple machines. Each table group will be responsible for one page of the book, which will be divided up into the various types of simple machines. The group needs to explain the concept of the simple machine, give examples of everyday tools that fit in the category, give both familiar and formal names for the tools, explain the action of each tool (appropriate verbs), and write and illustrate an idiom that is somehow related to the simple machine (for example: “He’s got a screw loose”).

● **Pictionary.** This is an excellent manipulation exercise that can be changed and adapted so students get extensive reentry of the vocabulary.

● **Timeline.** Students will create a timeline throughout the unit, indicating important inventions and inventors with pictures and labeling.

● **Tinker center.** This is an independent center in the classroom where students can take apart and put together a number of machines. For each one they tinker with, they need to fill out a discovery card (reentry of vocabulary + production). At the center, all tools have a special labeled place where they need to be put at the end of the activity (labeling activity).

● **Who’s who?** Students love this game and often choose to play it during indoor recess. I would adapt the game, using famous people we have been discussing and encouraging use of specific vocabulary use. It could also be adapted to play “What’s what?” with famous inventions.

● **Description of students’ own invention.** For the culminating event of this unit, students create their own original invention and display it at the Inventor’s Fair, to which parents and other grade levels are invited. Grade 5 students prepare a written description of why they invented it, how they constructed it and a detailed description with a three dimensional model of their invention. They also have to prepare an oral blurb to give to attendees of the fair and to be videotaped.

● **Day of the notables.** During this unit, students choose a biography to read (outside those read in class) and organize a “day of the notables” when students “become” those people. They interact all day as that person. They need to write a brief “autobiography,” which they read while being filmed.

## Assessment

- Word derivation test (based on family webs they did in class)
- Word association test (based on classroom categorical lists they generated)
- Vocabulary knowledge scale: Describing people, describing inventions, actions

This sketchy plan of action is at the initial stages of development. Having read the numerous published articles dealing with vocabulary acquisition, the why and what of vocabulary instruction is now much clearer. The “how” is based on suggested frameworks, yet needs to be interfaced with the reality of the classroom. The “how” also has to be much more detailed and defined for effective instruction. The “how” of such implementation, however, can now be applied again and again in a variety of situations and with varying thematic units.

Once the activities have been used and refined, they will be easy to implement on a regular basis.

We all need to work consistently and conscientiously so our students can reach greater depths of vocabulary knowledge. This will raise the overall proficiency and competence of our students and the reputation of the power of learning in the immersion setting. ○

*You can contact the author, Teresa Belisle, at Normandale Community School, 5701 Normandale Road, Edina, MN 55424; telephone (612) 928-2635; e-mail [tbelisle@edina.K12.mn.us](mailto:tbelisle@edina.K12.mn.us)*