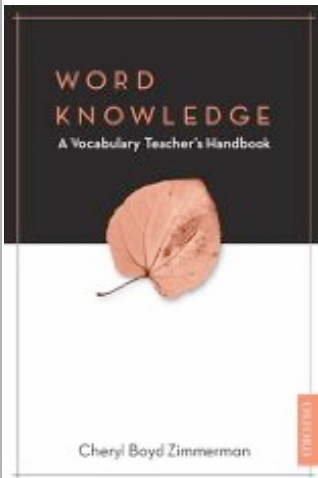


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Word Knowledge: A Vocabulary Teacher's Handbook		
Author:	Cheryl Boyd Zimmerman (2008)	
Publisher:	New York: Oxford University Press	
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Pp. vi + 154	ISBN 978-0-19-470393-2 (paperback)	\$21.50 U.S.



With the clarity of its exposition, the breadth of its field of reference, and the wealth of practical applications it presents *Word Knowledge: A Vocabulary Teacher's Handbook* is a valuable resource for all those involved in the complex task of teaching vocabulary. Recognizing that for all language users, including the most proficient, it may be claimed that “we don't just ‘know’ or ‘not know’ a word; we are always at varying stages of knowledge for each word we are learning” (p. 116), *Word Knowledge* seeks to address the vocabulary learning needs of both teachers and their learners.

Key concepts which together form the theoretical underpinning of *Word Knowledge* are “word consciousness” (pp. 3-5) and “layers of word knowledge” (pp. 5-6). The concept of “word consciousness” derives from the work of Scott and Nagy (2004) among others, and is defined by Zimmermann as “an awareness and appreciation of words and the ability to reflect on their use” (p. 3). The concept of “layers of word knowledge” relates to the widely held view that “to know a word means to know a great deal about it” (p. 5), an idea credited to Nation (1990, 2001). Together these twin concepts provide the organizing principle of *Word Knowledge*:

The premise of this book is that word consciousness is a critical skill to develop, first for vocabulary teachers, and then for their students. It will enable learners to improve their use of words by making insightful observations about words in authentic use. A key aspect of word consciousness is acknowledging the extensiveness of what it means to know a word. That is, word consciousness includes a growing understanding of the many layers of word knowledge. (p. 5)

Word Knowledge: A Vocabulary Teacher's Handbook contains seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the key concepts of “word consciousness” and “layers of word knowledge”. It then presents “key considerations for the classroom”, advising teachers to be selective in the words they target for instruction and the information they present about these words, to provide opportunities for adequate repetition and effective practice of vocabulary items, and to monitor their students’ understanding. Thereafter each of the following five chapters focuses on a particular “layer of word knowledge”: meaning; collocation; grammatical features; word parts; register and other language variation. The concluding chapter provides suggestions as to how to help students become independent word learners. Each of the seven chapters of *Word Knowledge* is accompanied by a set of notes, which provide details of works cited in the text and of additional sources of information. The book also contains a list of references, an answer key for the classroom activities, and an index.

The clarity of the chapter format in *Word Knowledge* helps readers to find their bearings quickly within the landscape of the book. Each chapter is divided into four main sections: background; a closer look at the particular topic under investigation; key considerations for the classroom; suggested classroom activities. Each of these sections is further broken down into numbered and headed sub-sections. Thus in Chapter Two, entitled “Working With Meaning”, the section “A closer look at meaning” discusses meaning under headings such as: “definitions and word learning”, “connotation and shades of meaning”, and “multiple meanings”. The following section, “Key considerations for the classroom”, then considers in separate sub-sections how teachers can effectively deal with definitions, help learners talk about meaning, and pay due attention to the learning burden posed by meaning.

The clear and accessible structure of each chapter of *Word Knowledge* is an attractive feature of the book. Moreover, since each of the sections and subsections can be understood in its own right, without necessary reference to what has gone before, *Word Knowledge* can be put to flexible and varied use, to suit an individual teacher’s preferences and circumstances. Thus teachers with adequate time at their disposal might profitably read the entire book from cover to cover, and thereby form an overall picture of the issues involved in vocabulary learning and teaching. On the other hand teachers short of preparation time can dive in and try out particular classroom activities straightaway, reading only those sections of the book directly related to their chosen activities. Indeed page references to relevant preceding chapter sections are provided within many of the classroom activities to enable readers to use the book in just this way.

Word Knowledge provides a succinct and wide-ranging account of the literature related to vocabulary learning. Throughout the book frequent reference is made to current research on vocabulary learning, as well as to practical handbooks for vocabulary teachers, among many other sources. When referring to the recent literature the book surveys traditional academic sources such as books and articles, but also pays considerable attention to sources of information on and tools relating to vocabulary that are available through the new media, including concordancers (p. 48), online dictionaries (p. 101), and academic websites such as one relating to Coxhead's (2000) New Academic Word List (p. 8).

Word Knowledge: A Vocabulary Teacher's Handbook sets out "to help tease apart the complex process of vocabulary learning and teaching and to provide ideas for addressing learners' needs" (p. v), and it fulfills this aim admirably. There are only a few minor ways in which I feel this excellent handbook could be improved, each of which relates to the "activities" sections of the chapters. Firstly, some indication as to the proficiency level (beginner, intermediate, advanced etc.) for which the various activities are intended might usefully have been provided. Secondly, in the suggested classroom procedures for the activities there is perhaps a certain overuse of working "in pairs or small groups" followed up by "class discussion". For example, in Chapter Seven every one of the suggested activities follows this methodological procedure. Moreover class discussion, in particular, can be quite difficult to manage successfully, especially in situations where class sizes are large.

These, though, are minor quibbles, and I have found *Word Knowledge* to be a valuable source of ideas for my own teaching and research. With regard to teaching, for several years I assigned an individual vocabulary enrichment project as one component of the coursework for a language development course taken by students majoring in ESL education. The results of this assignment, however, were often disappointing, and, though I encouraged the students to record their vocabulary in creative ways, very often the projects presented for assessment consisted of a simple list of words hastily memorized at the last moment. If I taught this kind of course again I would put the insights gained and activities learnt from my reading of *Word Knowledge*, and in particular of the chapter entitled "Helping Students Become Independent Word Learners", into practice, and I would be sure to obtain better results from this type of assignment.

In addition, the extensive coverage of vocabulary-related literature in *Word Knowledge* has also provided new pointers for my research into the vocabulary knowledge of students at the University of Brunei Darussalam. My colleague and I have been trying to understand why students' vocabulary does not appear to increase much over the first two years of their university studies, according to tests of productive vocabulary knowledge. Through *Word Knowledge* we have become acquainted with Batia Laufer's (1991) 'active vocabulary threshold hypothesis', and this promises to lead to a fruitful new line of inquiry.

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