

LEFT SIDE STRONG LLC

Evidence-Based Practice in Action

Word Knowledge Is World Knowledge

Module 4 — Robust Vocabulary Instruction

Participant Workbook

Name: _____ Date: _____

How to use this workbook

Work through this alongside the Module 4 lesson and slides. Read each short section, then complete the practice or reflection that follows. The goal is to leave with words you can teach tomorrow — and a routine you can reuse all year.

What you'll be able to do

1. Explain why vocabulary and word knowledge drive reading comprehension.
2. Choose which words are worth teaching, using the three tiers.
3. Teach a word deeply with an explicit, robust routine.
4. Build word meanings into networks of knowledge that transfer to new texts.

1 · Word knowledge is world knowledge

Decoding is the doorway; meaning is the destination. Once a student can read a word off the page, comprehension still has to happen — and that depends on knowing what the word means and how it connects to other ideas.

Words carry knowledge. Vocabulary is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension. The words a student knows are the knowledge they bring to a text — the raw material for building a mental model of what they read. (Cabell & Hwang, 2020; Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014; Kintsch, 1998)

Reflect

Think of a text your students read recently. Name two words that a student could decode but might not truly understand — and note how that gap could affect comprehension.

2 • Choose words worth teaching

You can't teach every word, so teach the ones with the most payoff. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) sort words into three tiers:

- Tier 1 — everyday words learned through conversation (happy, dog, run). Rarely need teaching.
- Tier 2 — high-utility academic words that appear across many texts and subjects (analyze, evidence, reluctant). Teach these deeply.
- Tier 3 — domain-specific words tied to one topic (photosynthesis, magnitude). Teach in the context of that content.

Practice — sort the words

Write the tier (1, 2, or 3) next to each word.

Word	Tier (1/2/3)	Teach deeply?
reluctant		
dog		
evidence		
photosynthesis		
analyze		
happy		

Answer key: *reluctant* (2, yes), *dog* (1, no), *evidence* (2, yes), *photosynthesis* (3, in context), *analyze* (2, yes), *happy* (1, no).

3 • Teach a word deeply

Robust, extended instruction outperforms a quick definition or incidental exposure — and it transfers to new contexts (Coyne et al., 2007, 2010, 2019). Plan the five-step routine for one Tier 2 word from a text you're teaching.

My Tier 2 word: _____

Step	My plan
1. Define (student-friendly)	
2. Model (text + relatable examples)	
3. Examples & non-examples	
4. Students use it (say & write)	
5. Revisit later this week	

4 • Build networks, not lists

Words stick — and transfer — when taught in connected groups. Choose a topic you teach, then grow a small network around one word using categories, contrasts, and connections (Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2014).

Topic / text: _____ **Target word:** _____

Network move	My words / notes
Category — related words in the same concept group	
Contrast — a word or idea it is NOT	
Connection — what students already know that links to it	

Reflect

How could teaching this word as part of a network — rather than alone — change what students take away?

Key terms

Tier 2 words — High-utility academic words that appear across many texts — the best return on teaching time.

Robust (extended) instruction — Teaching a word through definition, examples, use, discussion, and revisiting across days.

Breadth vs. depth — How many words a student knows something about vs. how richly they know each one.

Semantic network — A group of connected words and ideas — categories, contrasts, and connections.

Situation model — The mental model a reader builds of a text by connecting words and background knowledge.

Transfer — Using taught words in new texts and contexts beyond the original lesson.

Key sources

Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2013), Bringing Words to Life; Coyne et al. (2007, 2010, 2019); Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham (2014); Cabell & Hwang (2020); Kintsch (1998). See the Left Side Strong Research Base for full citations.