

POR QUÉ LA ENSEÑANZA EXPLÍCITA ES CLAVE PARA EL APRENDIZAJE DEL VOCABULARIO

WHY EXPLICIT TEACHING IS KEY TO VOCABULARY LERNING

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Resumen

Este artículo cuestiona la hegemonía del discurso pedagógico constructivista en el mundo occidental, contrastándolo con las evidencias de la ciencia cognitiva y la teoría de la carga cognitiva. El autor sostiene que, frente a los métodos de descubrimiento autónomo promovidos por normativas actuales, la **instrucción explícita** dirigida por el docente resulta más efectiva y equitativa, especialmente para el alumnado desfavorecido. A través de la obra de referencia *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck et al., 2013), se analiza la importancia de la enseñanza robusta del vocabulario de "Nivel 2" como pilar de la comprensión lectora. Se describe una aplicación práctica en el aula de Educación Secundaria donde se emplean técnicas de **evocación y elaboración** para consolidar el aprendizaje en la memoria a largo plazo. El trabajo concluye que la verdadera equidad educativa no reside en metodologías románticas, sino en una instrucción guiada por la evidencia que devuelva al docente su papel experto. La formación del profesorado debe, por tanto, transitar desde la abstracción

teórica hacia prácticas pragmáticas y tangibles que aseguren el éxito académico de todo el alumnado.

Palabras Clave: *Instrucción explícita, Vocabulario de Nivel 2, Comprensión lectora, Ciencia cognitiva, Equidad educativa, Evocación y elaboración, Práctica docente*

Abstract

This article challenges the dominance of constructivist pedagogical discourse in the Western world, contrasting it with insights from cognitive science and Cognitive Load Theory. The author argues that, contrary to the autonomous discovery methods promoted by current regulations, **explicit instruction** led by the teacher is more effective and equitable, particularly for disadvantaged students. Drawing on the seminal work *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck et al., 2013), the paper analyzes the importance of robust "Tier 2" vocabulary instruction as a cornerstone of reading comprehension. It describes a practical classroom application in Secondary Education, utilizing **retrieval and elaboration** techniques to consolidate learning in long-term memory. The study concludes that true educational equity does not lie in romanticized methodologies, but in evidence-based instruction that restores the teacher's role as an expert. Therefore, teacher training must shift from theoretical abstraction toward pragmatic, tangible practices that ensure academic success for all students.

Keywords: *Explicit instruction, Tier 2 vocabulary, Reading comprehension, Cognitive science, Educational equity, Retrieval and elaboration, Teaching practice*

"I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabrics of their life." (Leon Tolstoi, *en What is Art?*, 1898)

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the hegemonic narrative in Western pedagogy, education must be student-centered. This concept—which should mean providing our students with the best type of evidence-guided instruction and the necessary resources to offer them a high-quality academic education—is often interpreted by the dominant pedagogical discourse as a need to apply "constructivist" educational methods. Furthermore, these methods are usually misaligned with scientific evidence on how people learn, and there is ample empirical evidence demonstrating their lack of effectiveness. Conversely, teaching led by an expert teacher who uses explicit instruction to ensure that the vast majority of their students learn is more effective, efficient, and ultimately beneficial.

This article represents a well-founded essay on pedagogical reflection and practice transfer, analyzing vocabulary learning—which is fundamental for optimal reading comprehension—following a reference work to pay tribute to good teaching practices. It advocates for the need to explicitly teach vocabulary, illustrating this with a real classroom application involving secondary education students in their 3rd year of ESO (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*). Finally, it concludes with some final implications for good teaching practices.

2. CONTRIBUTIONS OF COGNITIVE SCIENCE TO EXPLICIT TEACHING

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between constructivist learning and constructivist teaching, the former being a scientific fact and the latter, a

misconception (Kirschner et al., 2006; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Hendrick & Kirschner, 2025). Learning is constructivist because everything we learn is acquired by connecting new information with what we already know and what is organized into schemas in our long-term memory. That is to say, the greater the prior knowledge, the easier it is to acquire new knowledge. Therefore, the fact that educational regulations have been devaluing content in successive educational reforms in favor of supposed general competencies is inconsistent, since one cannot be competent in anything without knowing a great deal about it. Conversely, constructivist teaching confuses how the brain works (a psychological process) with what the best teaching method is (a pedagogical process). It assumes that because it is each individual's brain that constructs knowledge, the teacher should not intervene, and each student must investigate or discover concepts on their own for the learning to be "authentic." Cognitive science, specifically Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), proved nearly 40 years ago that this way of proceeding in the classroom harms student learning. When learners—especially those who lack a solid foundation of knowledge stored and organized in their long-term memory—try to discover a complex concept without guidance, their working memory collapses. In contrast, explicit teacher-led instruction releases that load, allowing the brain to focus. It is highly concerning that these teaching practices and methods, which stem from the constructivist confusion of instruction, are embedded in educational regulations within the Royal Decrees of minimum core curricula. In some autonomous communities, teachers are forced to plan using learning situations (*situaciones de aprendizaje*)—even though the regulations themselves state that they are advisory rather than mandatory—which is ultimately an indirect way of forcing teaching staff to implement Project-Based Learning (Annex III of both Royal Decree 157/2022 for primary education and Royal Decree 217/2022 for secondary education details that learning situations are collaborative projects). Furthermore, PBL is a methodology that falls prey to the discovery myth, given that one of its essential purposes is to downplay the guidance offered to students by direct instruction.

Thus, for instance, in the Resolution of July 7, 2025, issued by the Regional Secretariat of Education of the Valencian Community, which approves the instructions for the organization and operation of centers teaching Compulsory Secondary Education and Baccalaureate (and its counterpart for Primary and Early Childhood education), it is stipulated that lesson planning must be channeled through learning situations. This is especially problematic in light of the available evidence, which indicates that explicit instruction is the most effective methodology for generating student learning (Stockard et al., 2018; Muijs et al., 2014; Prychodzin et al., 2004; Hattie, 2008; Morgan et al., 2015; Stebbins, 1977; Adams & Engelmann, 1996; OECD, 2016). When considering the development of reading comprehension, the evidence is even more overwhelming: explicit instruction is the most effective method for teaching phonological awareness to children (Piasta, 2023; Rupley et al., 2009), and children are unable to deduce the alphabetic principle on their own (Byrne, 2005). It is paradoxical that while regulations forcefully impose constructivist methods, the primary education decree of minimum core curricula itself (RD 157/2022) fails to explicitly mention literacy (except for digital literacy) or phonological decoding—both of which are foundational aspects of learning to read. One cannot help but wonder if all of this is because working on phonological awareness requires explicit instruction and repeated practice to achieve automation, and since these elements do not fit into the dominant pedagogical discourse, the choice is made to exclude this fundamental aspect of learning in our children's earliest stages. It leaves the impression that, at times, maintaining certain pedagogical approaches is prioritized over empirical evidence, even when implementing such instructional practices causes inequity by harming novice learners or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as both recent (Zhu et al., 2026) and classic evidence consistently demonstrate (Andersen & Andersen, 2017; Baker, Gersten & Lee, 2002; Kroesbergen, Van Luit & Maas, 2004; Marin & Halpern, 2011).

None of this implies that discovery learning has no place whatsoever in the teaching-learning process. However, guided discovery (guided by the specialist teacher) must take place once students have acquired a solid knowledge base. What is fundamental is the precise moment at which any instructional action is implemented within the pedagogical sequence; PBL, problem-based learning, or inquiry-based learning can become beneficial once students have a strong foundation. Thus, gradually and following a teacher-assisted guided discovery, the student gains full autonomy. Therefore, the problem lies not so much in the methods themselves—which the prevailing pedagogical trend usually groups under the label of "student-centered learning"—but rather in their premature use, independent of the type of content and the students we have before us. The practical application and use of acquired knowledge in different contexts (that is, transfer) will only be possible if that knowledge has been acquired in the first place. Similarly, complex skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity—while being the ultimate goal of education—are impossible to achieve without storing the necessary knowledge in long-term memory to develop them (one cannot discover and construct out of nothing). Expecting students to acquire complex concepts on their own is unfeasible, or at the very least, it delays the process significantly, leaving many students behind—especially those from humble backgrounds—and hindering the subsequent learning of everyone. Methodology must be at the service of the type of students before us and the content to be taught. Guided discovery, like any other method, has its place when conditions allow for it, but it should not be an end in itself, but rather a means to ensure that students learn better. Furthermore, in light of the evidence, explicit instruction must predominate in the classroom over discovery or inquiry-based learning. As Jacques Maritain, a Christian humanist philosopher, stated 85 years ago, *"an education which surrenders the child to the responsibility of acquiring information about what he does not know and he is ignorant of, which contents itself with contemplating the development of the child's instincts, and which makes the teacher a docile and superfluous assistant, is a simple failure of*

education and of adult responsibility toward youth" (Maritain, 1993). The teacher is the one who must direct the students' learning process because they are precisely the one who knows what is best for each of their students at any given moment, possessing the disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge to do so with professional judgment. It is the teacher who is equipped to guide students toward knowledge, helping them connect the new with their prior knowledge, thereby personalizing instruction effectively.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE VOCABULARY CASE

The reference work on vocabulary instruction mentioned at the beginning of this article is *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* by authors Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan (2013). As its subtitle indicates, this book addresses how to teach vocabulary in a robust manner. Its most widely known contribution is the classification of words into three categories to help teachers choose which ones to teach: Tier 1, basic, everyday words like *house*, *happy*, *cook*, which children learn through oral exposure and do not require school instruction; Tier 2 (the focus of the work), high-utility words that appear in written and academic texts but not in daily speech, such as *coincide*, *assertive*, *scarcity*, *precarious*, and which are vital for deep reading comprehension; and Tier 3, technical words from specific domains like *isosceles* (mathematics), *photosynthesis* (biology), or *suffrage* (history), which are taught as the specific topic arises in class. The authors contend that for a word to transfer to long-term memory, instruction must be frequent; thus, the student needs to encounter the word multiple times and across different contexts. Furthermore, this instruction must also be active (students must process the word: comparing it to others, using it in their own sentences, identifying examples and non-examples) and contextual (isolated lists are not taught; rather, words that appear in the texts being read in class). This vocabulary learning is paramount, as evidence demonstrates that learning vocabulary is what most enhances reading comprehension, especially in primary education (Quinn et al., 2015). Corson

(1985) used the term "lexical bar" to describe the barrier that exists between the everyday language of oral conversations and the systems of meaning created by academic language. While everyday language is more concrete and is acquired naturally, the words that make up the "lexical bar" are often polymorphic (with multiple roots, prefixes, and suffixes) and require more explicit instruction and rich learning experiences to be mastered. Expecting students to grasp the meaning of complex vocabulary encountered in texts based solely on contextual clues is overly utopian (often the context is sparse or ambiguous); therefore, vocabulary must be treated as a body of knowledge in its own right, whose acquisition requires deliberate, planned, precise, and periodically reviewed instruction. Academic success is only possible if students are able to overcome this lexical bar (Corson, 1995); that is, if they are able to transition from informal spoken language to the literate and technical language required at higher levels of education. When students develop a deep knowledge of vocabulary, their reading confidence increases, their writing becomes more sophisticated, and they are better prepared to independently access grade-level content. A robust vocabulary is the foundation that improves comprehension, reading fluency, and written expression. For this reason, the vocabulary that should be the primary focus of learning must be Tier 2, as these are words characteristic of written text that appear frequently across a wide variety of fields and contexts, and a lack of knowledge regarding them is the root of the reading comprehension problems that leave students academically left behind from early stages.

The book proposes a practical instructional sequence for Tier 2 words: 1) Introduction: presenting the word within the context of a story or text; 2) Explanation: providing a "student-friendly explanation" (not a dictionary definition) that the learner can understand; 3) Interaction: asking quick questions (for example, to work on the word "precarious," asking, "Which of these situations is more precarious: being in a classroom in winter without heating or sitting on a comfortable couch? Why?"). Additionally, students are also encouraged to use

the words being practiced in the classroom in their daily speech through positive reinforcement. The work as a whole is an ode to teacher-directed instruction, as the expert teacher plans, sequences, and controls the entire process at all times to ensure deep vocabulary learning on the part of the students. First of all, the expert teacher's judgment is required in the very selection of the words to be worked on in the classroom—within that distinction among the three tiers—in order to focus the students' attention on the most relevant terms. Furthermore, it is the teacher who has previously selected the story or text in which the concepts to be addressed appear, which are deemed most important for the students to integrate into their long-term memory. On the other hand, the authors, with sound judgment, start from the premise that reading dictionary definitions does not help a student "own" (in their own words) a term—given that dictionary definitions hinder students' understanding of meaning because they use vague language and establish poor differentiation between similar words. Instead, it is much more effective for the teacher to provide an explanation using language closer to them so that they understand it deeply. Only in this way will students be able to use these words in different contexts, as well as understand the concepts in new contexts (which, following the terminology of the LOMLOE, constitutes "being competent").

Likewise, by asking students questions that incorporate the target terms under study, both retrieval and elaboration are practiced—two aspects that evidence shows deeply and significantly foster student learning. Through these questions (once again, previously created and directed by the teacher), the students' brains are forced to constantly reorganize information. This helps the learner identify gaps, allowing them to quickly realize what they actually know and what they have forgotten, thereby combating the "illusion of fluency"—a trap that consists of believing we know something simply because it feels familiar when we read it (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020). Thus, information is prevented from merely remaining in the working memory and fading away, increasing the chances of it being integrated into robust schemas within the long-term memory

(Roediger & Butler, 2011; Carpenter et al., 2022). On the other hand, when students respond to these interactive questions posed by the teacher, they engage in elaboration. This process consists of having the student add their own details or explanations to the new information to make it more meaningful, thereby making connections with knowledge they already possess and rendering the information much harder to forget in the future. Deep understanding is fostered by forcing the student to organize information in a logical manner (Dunlosky et al., 2013).

All of this can be combined with good teaching practices that maximize the student participation ratio, using techniques such as cold-calling (unannounced questions) or mini-whiteboards (Lemov, 2021). To elicit the maximum number of student responses (which need not always be verbal, but mental), the ideal approach is to seek techniques that keep all students cognitively active and ensure that no one remains disengaged. For example, rather than following the traditional practice of calling only on students who raise their hands (which allows the same few to always monopolize the interaction), the teacher can call on anyone without a predictable or logical order, or have all students write the correct answer on a mini-whiteboard. In this way, the teacher receives immediate feedback since they can verify that all students have understood the concepts and, if not, readjust instruction accordingly. Ultimately, one of the most vital aspects that makes direct instruction effective—despite often being caricatured as a monologue—is its use of interactive questioning.

In each of the points described, it becomes clear that if students were the ones deciding and/or discovering each aspect on their own, the learning would be more superficial. The teacher possesses greater knowledge to determine which stories or texts are most appropriate and rich for enhancing student learning; furthermore, evidence shows that students do not typically have good judgment when it comes to choosing what is best suited to adequately develop their learning (Carpenter et al., 2020). The dictionary definitions that students would find for the words being studied would not allow them to fully

comprehend the meaning and all its nuances. Finally, the questions formulated by the students themselves would not achieve the same degree of suitability, depth, and personalization tailored to the specific characteristics of each student group. In short, it is the expert teacher, possessing deep knowledge, who is best equipped to guide the learning of their students, who are by nature novices.

4. CLASSROOM APPLICATION

During the second term of the 2025/26 academic year, this robust vocabulary work was put into practice across three 3rd-year ESO groups in the subject of English. After reading a series of texts—which had been pre-selected by the teacher because they were suited to that year's specific group of students—a set of words emerged that fell into the Tier 2 category from the work of Beck et al. (2013): *own, physicist, entrepreneur, sue, reliable, monkey business, raise awareness, come up with, healthcare, pottery, researcher, reach a goal, remote*.

A pedagogical sequence was planned with the following learning objectives:

- To systematically incorporate the new lexical repertoire through strategies of association, word families, or contextual deduction. This relates to *Specific Competencies 5 and 6: Multilingualism and Interculturality*, as it involves linguistic reflection to assimilate Tier 2 words, connecting them with students' prior knowledge and expanding their repertoire.
- To identify and interpret the meaning of Tier 2 terms in short written texts of an academic or informative nature. This connects with *Specific Competency 1: Reading Comprehension*, given that students must "learn and understand" vocabulary within specific contexts (in this case, by reading an academic-level text where these Tier 2 terms appear).

- To use the acquired Tier 2 vocabulary with precision and propriety to write or orally present clear and structured arguments. This links with *Specific Competency 2: Oral Expression and Written Expression*, as the goal is for students to know how to use the new vocabulary in the oral and written texts they produce, thereby providing their discourse with greater precision and lexical richness.

Thus, a set of questions and short writing tasks was created in which students practiced retrieval and elaboration to help them learn the words meaningfully. In this instance, aspects were combined from the magnificent work *The Writing Revolution* (Hochman & Wexler, 2024)—another example of a useful, real, and practical resource to help teachers enhance student learning (in this case, through written expression). The questions and short writing tasks were as follows:

- *Who usually owns more money and property, a physicist or an entrepreneur? Explain.*
- *Who is more likely to get sued, a reliable individual or a person who is famous for their monkey business? Why?*
- *Finish the following two sentences:*
 - *Raising awareness about the suffering of the Palestinian people is important. However, ...*
 - *Raising awareness about the suffering of the Palestinian people is important. Therefore, ...*
- *Who comes up with more original and creative ideas, a healthcare worker, a pottery artist, or a science researcher? Why?*
- *Finish the following three sentences:*
 - *People tend to feel well when they reach their goals, because...*
 - *People tend to feel well when they reach their goals, but...*
 - *People tend to feel well when they reach their goals, so...*
- *What kind of person enjoys living in a remote village? Why?*

Students had to think deeply about these concepts, reorganize their mental schemas, and connect everything with their prior knowledge of the world. All of this helped ensure that they integrated them into their long-term memory, enabling them both to understand and use them autonomously in different contexts in the future. In short, the students were forced to think hard about those words to provide coherent answers and sentences in accordance with their meaning and semantic nuances. Later, when the class review was conducted (implementing the previously mentioned strategies of cold-calling and mini-whiteboards), both the correct answers and, above all, the mistakes made by all the students were used as raw material for learning. This was carried out with Daniel Willingham's maxim always in mind: "memory is the residue of thought" (Willingham, 2009). Thus, both the teacher and the learners were able to benefit immediately from an excellent instructional resource.

Working on these three objectives (comprehension, reflection, and production) in an integrated manner allowed the students, in a sense, to transition from passive reception to communicative autonomy. By ensuring that students do not merely see the word and have its meaning explained, but also analyze and subsequently use it to argue, the brain consolidates knowledge in a much deeper way. Instead of merely learning yet another simple vocabulary list, this linguistic reflection—which forces them to associate concepts, connect new terms with word families already present in their prior knowledge, deduce meaning from context, justify cause and effect, and contrast different statements in subordinate clauses—represents cognitive work aimed at ensuring those words transfer to long-term memory. All of this was done with the ultimate goal of helping students independently access the typical academic texts found across different school subjects, where the presence of Tier 2 vocabulary is constant. Furthermore, during the class review, errors in punctuation, grammar, syntax, and coherence were observed, which offered the teacher a magnificent opportunity to plan future instruction based on the specific needs of each of the three class groups in which this pedagogical

sequence was implemented (formative assessment). Overall, it was highly satisfying to observe how, in the answers to the questions posed above and the sentences the students had to complete, vocabulary was used with precision, and their arguments gained weight, clarity, and rigor—something crucial for their academic and professional future.

The examples above are just a small sample of the diverse and rich array of activities offered in *Bringing Words to Life*, which will be gradually introduced in upcoming school years. Some of the particularly interesting ones include **word associations** (students must develop relationships between new words, for example, "*Which word goes with kindergartner? (novice); Which word goes with piano? (virtuoso)*"); **Have You Ever...?** (students must associate the newly learned words with contexts and activities from their own experience, for example, "*Describe a time when you might urge someone*"); **Which Would Be...?** (creating questions using new words so that students choose between different alternatives, for example, "*Which would be easier to confine, butterflies or cats? Why?*"); and **generating situations, contexts, and examples** (students provide examples when responding to questions that establish the connection between the word and its meaning, for example, "*If a woman bought a fine lacy dress, you could say 'It is delicate'. When else might you talk about something being delicate?*"). There are many more, and I highly recommend this work as a source of inspiration for implementing vocabulary learning with students. The goal is always to have students interact with the target words under study and actively participate in the reflection and use of their meanings on a frequent basis, whether by responding to or explaining examples, or by creating their own. These multiple and varied exposures to the words will foster their deep processing.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Teaching staff need real assistance, and they need to be offered useful practices. There is a disconnect between the explanations teachers receive in training courses and their application in the classroom (Domínguez et al., 2015). Both in-service and aspiring teachers demand a minimum level of transferability from what they are taught in their training to the actual classroom context; they call for scaling back purely theoretical approaches and increasing more pragmatic viewpoints. Good teaching practices (widely backed by evidence), such as Barack Rosenshine's (2012) principles of instruction or the proposals for practicing vocabulary explained above from the work of Isabel L. Beck and colleagues (2013), help teachers because they consist of specific examples that distance themselves from the abstraction characterizing the dominant pedagogical discourse and can be put into practice immediately. We need tangible examples to apply in the classroom, far removed from excessive idealization and semantic labyrinths. Teachers require more practical support for designing good lessons and fewer proposals that are excessively theoretical or difficult to transfer to the classroom.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that explaining and talking extensively to students is a good teaching practice, despite all the messages (and regulations) from the hegemonic educational discourse that suggest otherwise. We should not feel bad about it, even if the latest educational press release features an expert criticizing it, even if it is occasionally disparaged within faculties of education, and even if an educational inspector might advise against it following the guidelines of whichever administration is in power. The evidence backs it up. Doing so means caring for your students and prioritizing their learning, independent of the pedagogical trends that emerge and disappear over time. Educational equity is not achieved through abstract discourse and a practice detached from evidence. Providing the best instruction is the true student-centered approach.

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