

# What's in a Word?

## *Increasing Acquisition of Word Knowledge through Effective Vocabulary Instruction*

Loleta D. Sartin and Rosalyn L. Magee

Johnny (a pseudonym) was able to decode the words in the poem, "Democracy." When asked to summarize the poem, Johnny responded, "I don't know what it was about." This is a common scenario in classrooms. Students are able to identify words automatically, but are unable to discuss the meaning of the words. Decoding is a component of the reading process, but in order to become a reader, one must be able to both decode and understand the words on the page as defined by the National Reading Panel, are the words we must know to communicate effectively (LINCS, 2010). are four types of vocabulary: listening (words we can hear and understand), speaking (words we use when we speak), reading (words we can identify and understand when we read) and writing (the words we use in writing) (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009). As a student's vocabulary increases, the better reader he will become. There is a positive correlation between a person's vocabulary attainment and fluency, comprehension, and oral and written communication skills.

### **Effective Instruction**

To teach reading well, teachers must use a combination of strategies incorporated in a coherent plan with specific goals. Teachers must know how children learn to read, why some children have difficulty reading, and how to identify and implement instructional strategies for all children (National Reading Panel, 2000). effective instruction, modeling matters, teachers must model for students how to take ownership of new words. Having students actively engage with vocabulary words will advance their knowledge of the new words. This can be accomplished by helping students visualize the words, playing games with the words, and using newly acquired words in speaking, reading, and writing. Direct instruction of vocabulary helps students learn difficult words and is a valuable part of reading instruction (Johnson, 2001). should have numerous encounters with the vocabulary, experiment with the vocabulary, and engage in meaningful use of the vocabulary (National Institute for Literacy, 2001). In order to fully learn a word and its connotations, a student needs multiple exposures

to the word in different reading contexts (Sedita, 2005). Acquiring vocabulary should be an active process relating to students' background knowledge. Educators should remember when teaching students new words, comprehension is the ultimate goal.

### **Vocabulary Instruction in Action**

Providing rich and meaningful vocabulary instruction is vital to fostering students' success and continuous achievement in reading and writing. It is the teacher's duty to provide students with a stimulating learning environment while inspiring them to achieve and prosper.

### **Step Inside My Classroom**

Through the years, I have established and modified several instructional strategies beneficial to enhancing my students' vocabulary acquisition. The students perceive they are playing a game, while all along they are sharpening their reading and writing skills. The strategies I utilize are applicable across all grade levels.

**I. Gallery Show** – This strategy is often used to introduce a new set of vocabulary words. Prior to seeing the words, students utilize pictures to brainstorm descriptors and activate their background knowledge. Their listening and speaking vocabularies

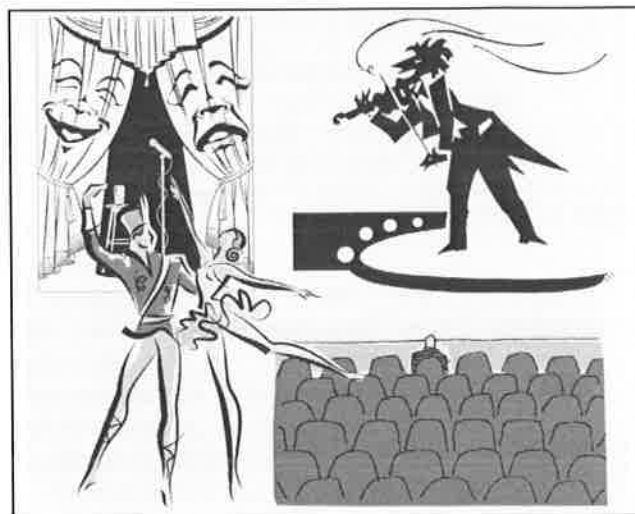


FIGURE 1: Cluster of pictures represents the word *audience*

are extended by engaging in "big dialogue." This strategy requires the teacher to create a cluster of four or five pictures to represent each word. The visuals may be created using an interactive white board or PowerPoint. (see Figure 1).

a. Working in small groups, students are given approximately two minutes to view groups of related pictures and record words or phrases that come to mind (see Figure 2). This allows students to draw from past experiences and make connections to their existing schema. The collaborative dialogue actively engages each student. It provides students the opportunity to explore with each other and removes any anxiety felt by those experiencing difficulty with oral expression. Following is an example of how a group of students may respond to the images depicted in Figure 1:

*Student #1 – dancing*

*Student #2- performances*

*Student #3 – on a stage*

*Student #4– people in a theater watching*

Name _____	<b>GALLERY SHOW</b>
1. _____	
2. _____	
3. _____	
4. _____	
5. _____	
6. _____	
<b>Reminders</b> Use "Big Dialogue" Everyone participates in the group	
<b>Things to think about...</b> How do you connect with the pictures? What do the pictures make you think of? What words come to mind?	

FIGURE 2: Gallery Show Form

b. After the Gallery Show, students are asked to place the Gallery Show form aside. I present one of the vocabulary words and allow students to discuss their knowledge of the word. I clarify any misconceptions and help students generate a kid friendly definition. The students discuss the definition and correctly utilize the word in sentences.

c. The students revisit their Gallery Show form and analyze their recordings. They determine which set of words or phrases appear to match the vocabulary word presented. I show the pictures that correspond to the vocabulary word. Students determine if the pictures are an accurate representation of the word. Lastly, students are required to justify their responses.

d. Steps B and C are repeated until all words have been presented.

**II. Get the Picture #1** – This strategy may be used as a whole or small group activity. It is closely related to the Gallery Show given that visual representations are provided in both. The Gallery Show requires students to brainstorm and activate background knowledge prior to viewing the words, while Get the Picture requires students to connect their knowledge of the word to a given picture. Both strategies may be used to introduce a set of vocabulary words; however, Get the Picture may also be utilized as a follow-up activity.

a. If this is an introduction of the vocabulary words, I present each word and allow students to discuss their knowledge of the words. I clarify any misconceptions and help students generate kid friendly terms.

b. If this is a follow-up activity, students review vocabulary words and discuss word meanings.

c. I display a picture and allow students to determine which vocabulary word matches the picture (see Figure 3). Students must justify their selection. (Note: Each student may have a different word selection for a given picture.) Students justify their selections by using the vocabulary words in sentences that describe something happening in the picture. Following is an example of vocabulary words and examples of how students justified their matches.



FIGURE 3: Dwayne and Kayla Magee

*Vocabulary Words:* expression, noticed, exploded, definitely, positive, grumbled

Student #1 - The girl has an excited **expression** on her face.

Student #2 - The father is **positive** that his daughter is happy.

Student #3 - The girl is **definitely** happy!

Student #4 - The girl **exploded** with excitement.

Student #5 - The father **noticed** that his daughter was happy on her birthday.

This process continues using a variety of pictures, realizing that some pictures will have more choice possibilities than others.

**III. Get the Picture #2** – This strategy should not be used to introduce new vocabulary. I ensure the students understand the meaning of each word prior to attempting this activity.

It is a small group exercise and requires higher order thinking and imagination.

a. Students work in small groups, justifying as many vocabulary words to a picture as possible. Students write sentences in order to share with their classmates. Using the picture and vocabulary words mentioned above in "Get the Picture," the vocabulary word grumbled does not directly correlate with the picture. A student using his imagination could say, "The father and his daughter are happy, but the mother **grumbled** when she saw the mess they made."

b. I also employ this strategy allowing small groups to find their own pictures in magazines or newspapers.

c. To conclude this lesson I allow the groups to share their pictures and sentences. Their peers determine if they agree with the justifications. I clarify any misunderstandings.

**IV. Vocabulary Word Chart** - I use a vocabulary word chart after students have gained knowledge of the new words (see Figure 4). This allows them to record their own definition and visual representation for each vocabulary word.

### Linking Reading and Writing

The vocabulary strategies discussed are often integrated into reading lessons; however, this is simply not enough. In order to gain true mastery and "ownership" of their new vocabulary, students must assimilate these words into their writing activities. Students are encouraged to use new and past vocabulary terms in their narratives when feasible. As a class we celebrate the dynamic vocabulary we hear in our classmates' writing pieces.

Word	Picture	Meaning
<i>expression</i>		
<i>noticed</i>		
<i>exploded</i>		
<i>definitely</i>		
<i>positive</i>		
<i>grumbled</i>		
<i>accident</i>		

FIGURE 4: Vocabulary Word Chart

### We Must Get it Right

Matthew's Gospel 25:29 states, "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. Reflecting on this verse, Dr. Stanovich coined a phrase The "Matthew Effect," which has been summarized as "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." effect is evident when analyzing students' vocabulary development. Students with larger vocabularies are better readers and engage in the reading process more often. As a result, the more students read, the better readers they become. Students who have inadequate reading vocabularies, will struggle with reading; therefore, they will have less desire to read. Consequently, their reading ability will continue to decline.

Teachers must be equipped with content knowledge and research based vocabulary instruction to enhance students' vocabulary acquisition; this will directly impact students' overall reading ability. Understanding that vocabulary development involves active engagement and continuous reinforcement is paramount. Until we address the needs of each child, we will continue to play the blame game. College professors will wonder what occurred in the K-12 system, teachers will find fault in the home situation, and Johnny will continue to respond, "I don't know what it was about."

Whose Fault Is It?  
Certainly Not Mine...

The college professor said,  
"Such wrong in the student is a shame,  
lack of preparation in high school is to blame."

Said the high school teacher, "Good heavens, that boy is a fool. The fault, of course, is with the middle school."

The middle school teacher said,  
"From much stupidity may I be spared, they send him to me so unprepared."

The elementary teacher said, "The kindergartners are block-heads all. They call it preparation; why, it's worse than none at all."

The kindergarten teacher said, Such lack of training never did I see, what kind of mother must that woman be."

The mother said, "Poor helpless child, he's not to blame. You see, his father's folks are all the same."

Said the father, at the end of the line, "I doubt the rascal's even mine!"

Anonymous

Printed in the English Journal, 1996

## References

Johnson, D. D. (2001). *Vocabulary in the elementary and middle school*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS). *Reading components*. Retrieved from: <http://lincs.ed.gov/research/researchdef.html>

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups* (NIH Publication No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

National Institute for Literacy. (2001). *Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read*. Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy.

Reutzel, D.R., & Cooter, R.B. (2009). *The essentials of teaching children to read: The teacher makes the difference*. Boston, Massachusetts: Pearson Education.

Sedita, J. (2005). Effective vocabulary instruction. *Insights on Learning Disabilities*, 2(1) 33-45.

## CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

The *Georgia Journal of Reading* is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. The Journal is a refereed journal with national representation on the editorial board and is published by the Georgia Reading Association. We are seeking manuscripts concerning the improvement of reading and language arts instruction at all levels of education.

Manuscripts should be double-spaced and the format should conform to the guidelines presented in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Ed.). The author's name, full address, email address, affiliation, and a brief statement about professional experience should be submitted on a cover sheet. Three copies of the manuscript should be included. All submitted articles undergo blind review by multiple reviewers.

Authors are to process manuscripts in Microsoft Word. If a manuscript is accepted for publication, authors will be expected to send an electronic copy to the editor after revisions are made. Three types of manuscripts are being solicited.

### Full-length Articles

These articles should deal with research, current issues, and recent trends in reading or literacy programs. Appropriate topics for the Journal include project descriptions, research reports, theoretical papers and issues in reading education at the local, state, or national level. Preference is given to articles focusing on topics that impact Georgia's students.

### Articles for the Exchange Column

Articles for this column should describe creative teaching ideas and strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. These articles are shorter than full-length articles and may or may not require references. If references are needed, they should conform to APA format mentioned above.

### Book and Resource Reviews

Reviews should describe and critique children's books, professional books, or reading resources (such as software, assessment tools, etc.) that are appropriate for use by teachers and reading professionals. Complete bibliographic information, the address of the publisher, and the cost of the materials (resources) should be included.

### Photographs

Do you have photos that illustrate the use of innovative literacy practices in your classroom? How about important literacy events—a child reading a book for the first time, a family member sharing a favorite book from childhood at storytime, an adolescent reader lounging in a special spot engrossed in a book? Please share them with others by submitting them for possible publication. High-quality resolution and pleasing composition are expected in submissions. If selected, you will be asked to submit the photos electronically and to provide a signed release form for anyone appearing in the photos.

### Submit Manuscripts and Photos to:

Beth Pendergraft  
Augusta State University  
2500 Walton Way  
Augusta, GA 30904  
[bpendergraft@aug.edu](mailto:bpendergraft@aug.edu)