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Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4–12

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## Diaphragming Sentences: A Case for Word Control

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Most of us approach language a bit like Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty does. We know what we want to say but often struggle to find just the right words. The title of this chapter arises from that dilemma. Once while I was visiting Kyle Gonzalez’s classroom in Orlando, one of her students boldly announced that he would like to “diaphragm that sentence.”

As teachers we not only feel responsible for our own use of language, we also feel compelled to focus on vocabulary study so that our students are exposed to rich, expressive language. For secondary teachers, the academic proving ground that looms most closely for our students is the SAT, but all teachers have to deal with state- or district-mandated tests. However, most teachers have goals larger than having their students do well on those tests. They want to involve their students in productive vocabulary instruction because they know the value of well-chosen words. Unfortunately, vocabulary instruction is one of those educational arenas in which research and best practice are elusive. I think Baumann and Kameenui (1991), in their synthesis of research related to vocabulary instruction, say it best: “We know too much to say we know too little, and we know too little to say that we know enough.”

For most of my teaching career I vacillated between knowing too little and knowing too much. When I began teaching, I “taught” vocabulary the same way my teachers had taught me: I assigned lists of words; asked students to look the words up in the dictionary and write them in sentences; and gave weekly vocabulary tests. Those exercises then gave way to programmed vocabulary books. My students and I worked our way through levels A–F, but it didn’t take long for me to realize that these exercises didn’t increase their speaking, reading, and writing language any more than looking words up in the dictionary had. Students seldom (never) gained enough in-depth word knowledge from this practice to integrate the words into their spoken or written language. These exercises did, however, keep them quiet for long periods, and I was doing what all the veteran teachers I knew were doing, so I truly wanted to believe that students were learning from this activity. In retrospect, I have to admit that it didn’t matter whether students were learning or not—I simply did not know what else to do. It was my job to teach vocabulary, and if I didn’t teach (or would it be more accurate to say assign?) vocabulary in the traditional ways, what would I have done instead? Many teachers today struggle with these same demons: we’re supposed to be teaching vocabulary and if we don’t do the traditional “assign, define, and test,” what do we do instead? and if we do something different, how can we prove it’s working?

For most students, finding definitions and writing those words in sentences have had little apparent impact on their word knowledge and language use. A senior in one of my classes made that point in an essay about what needed to be changed in high school English classes. Condemning the use of programmed vocabulary books, she stated, “Those are words nobody uses. Take the word *bourgeois*, for example. I’ll never use that word again.” And it’s quite true that I seldom hear students use these words while talking with their friends or even during class discussions. In fact, when I am in schools I see students communicate almost without language—hand gestures, body language,

grunts, sighs, and abbreviations seem to have taken the place of “conversation.” As I listen to students, I wonder whether a single word from any teacher’s vocabulary list has become integrated into their natural language. With a ninth-grade word list like that given to one student I know, which included such “highly visible” words as *mephitic*, *nacreous*, *nugatory*, and *scissile*, it makes sense that students see vocabulary study as deadly. The natural language I hear in schools today would produce the following Dolch list (words that express most of what they want to say) for adolescents:

whatever	dawg	the bomb	duh
ya—right	my bad	cool	that’s bad
so?	no doubt	puh-leez	that rocks
wassup?	straight up	later	word
YO!	kid	that’s phat	true-dat
as if	what it is	awesome	whaddup?
like	NOT	dissin’	borring

My students didn’t use the words I assigned from a word list. They used the words they heard on television and radio; they used words from the music they listened to; and they used the words I used with them. When all my students wanted my attention at the same time, I would laughingly accuse them of having no joy in delayed gratification. After only a few days of my joking with them like this, I heard Jennifer say to Rob, “Go sit down until I finish. Don’t you have any delayed gratification?” When students asked me for a pen or pencil, I had one of two responses: “Sure you can. I seem to have a plethora of pencils today,” or “Sorry. I seem to have a dearth of pencils today.” Soon I heard students using those same words with each other. When it was obvious that I was pleased with students, they would say, “Are we the epitome of all the students you have?” They used and played with the language we created together—not the language I assigned.

Whenever I was in Mary Giard's first-grade classroom, I was always amazed at the level of language she used with six-year-olds; but I also saw that in a matter of weeks those children absorbed and used that language in natural contexts. They talked about reruns in running records, strategies for reading, and self-assessment the way many students in college reading courses talk. When I returned to my high school classroom after those observations, I had a renewed passion for creating that same kind of language-rich environment. My "teaching moments" included using my natural language in ways these students had never heard before. While I joked with them about the language they used and even helped students who were kicked out of class for using "dirty words" create a list of alternatives, I saw my role as one of demonstrating a more advanced level of language. I tried not to take my language to their level but rather to bring their language to mine. When I began to see how easily students internalized the language we used together in meaningful contexts, I began to rethink the way I taught vocabulary.

This book is intended to help teachers who find themselves in a similar teaching dilemma. It shows the ways in which several teachers and I have implemented vocabulary practices that move away from decontextualized, single definitions and toward a concept-based, multilayered knowledge of words. The strategies shared here are consistent with research on how we learn new words, connect them to our existing knowledge, and retrieve them when we want to use them in reading, writing, and speaking.

## A Foundation in Research

**O**n a recent trip to California I was visiting a middle school and the teachers told me, "We're not allowed to use the word *context* anymore when we're doing vocabulary instruction." After talking with them about why they would have been

given such a mandate, it occurred to me that it probably was rooted in research that cites the unreliability of context as a way to determine meaning and improve comprehension. It appears that the teaching of vocabulary has fallen into the same pit of controversy in which many other literacy practices have landed; therefore, I want to begin by sharing some of the research that has led me to develop a more specific and consistent plan for vocabulary instruction. (Appendix A lists a number of researchers and teachers whose work has influenced my thinking and practice.)

The importance of grounding our practice in research, both our own teacher research and the work of noted authorities, was brought home for me at a workshop I recently conducted, in which I asked teachers to look for common areas in teaching language arts. They came up with the following: literature, vocabulary, and writing. After we generated our list, we worked collaboratively to ground our practice in research (the form in Appendix E.1 is an excellent vehicle for structuring discussions like this). When I asked them to cite research and researchers relative to the common practices, a few teachers offered some names connected with writing and literature: Rosenblatt, Atwell, Graves, Fletcher, Romano. In the area of vocabulary, however, they drew blanks. Even though the last two decades have offered teachers a great deal of research to support changes in how we teach vocabulary, most of that research has not been translated into models for our classrooms. Most teachers therefore continue their traditional practices.

## Vocabulary Research That Makes a Difference

**T**he connection between reading comprehension and word knowledge has been clear for many years. According to Davis (1944, 1968), “vocabulary knowledge is related to and affects comprehension. The relationship between word knowl-

edge and comprehension is unequivocal.” Recent research showing the connection between word knowledge, concept development, and prior knowledge and the impact these have on reading comprehension indicates that some drastic changes in our teaching methods are warranted.

In their contribution to the *Handbook on Teaching the English Language Arts*, Baumann and Kameenui synthesize the empirical research on vocabulary instruction (their own and others’) and offer their recommendations for effective practice. It is on their foundation that I have built the strategies highlighted in this book. McKeown and Beck’s (1988) assertion that “word knowledge is not an all or nothing proposition. Words may be known at different levels” led me to understand that as a teacher I should not be searching for one way to teach vocabulary for all words, for all my students, for an entire year. Rather, I should be creating a language-rich environment with lots of reading, talking, and writing in which varying levels of direct instruction occur.

Beck, McCaslin, and McKeown (1980) suggest that the levels of word knowledge (unknown, acquainted, and established) dictate instructional strategies. Kameenui et al. (1982) call these levels *verbal association knowledge*, *partial concept knowledge*, and *full concept knowledge*. The names given these levels are not that significant; the knowledge that our vocabulary instruction must change depending on the degree to which students must be able to access a given word is. For example, a word like *run* is common enough that we want students to recognize and understand the word in multiple contexts (a run on the stock market, a run in a pair of pantyhose, a run in baseball, a press run, to run away from home); use the word in their speaking and writing; connect the word to their own lives and offer examples of its correct and incorrect use; understand subtle shades in the word’s meaning; and generate effective contexts to help others understand the word. Conversely, encountering a word like *lodestone* in our science books, we might simply say, “This is a rock with magnetic properties.” Later, if we encounter the word *lodestone* again in a story about someone with a