

6-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Wynn, M. J. (1993). Proprietary Vocabulary Acquisition: A Creative, Thematic Adventure. *Reading Horizons*, 33 (5). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol33/iss5/4

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Proprietary Vocabulary Acquisition: A Creative, Thematic Adventure

Marjorie J. Wynn

Teachers have discovered that proprietary vocabulary acquisition by elementary students is enhanced through participation in a creative, thematic approach to learning. Proprietary vocabulary is a collection of words over which the owner has mastery of understanding in listening and reading and mastery of use in speaking and writing. This definition is based on the meaning of proprietor, *an owner who has mastery and control over a possession*, and vocabulary, *a stock of words*.

In-depth vocabulary knowledge is an important component in reading comprehension (Carr and Wixson, 1986; Heimlich and Pittelman, 1986; Nagy, 1988) and written composition (Duin and Graves, 1988; Tompkins and Hoskisson, 1991). Vocabulary growth is stimulated through repeated exposure to words within meaningful contexts. A thematic approach to vocabulary instruction provides a meaningful context for repeated exposure to words while activating students' prior background knowledge and providing a framework for acquiring new vocabulary (Duin and Graves, 1988); Nagy, 1988; Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik, 1990; Tompkins and Hoskisson, 1991). A variety of creative experiences promoting active involvement of students in their learning will provide interest in vocabulary acquisition

(Duin and Graves, 1988; Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik, 1990). This article's purpose is to examine proprietary vocabulary acquisition, a thematic approach to vocabulary development, and teachers' use of creative experiences to enhance acquisition of proprietary vocabulary.

Proprietary vocabulary acquisition

A model was developed by the author to enhance teachers' understanding of proprietary vocabulary acquisition. Teachers were asked to visualize an elementary student's brain as having three cognitive baskets. In each of these cognitive baskets there are vocabulary word-blocks from which the student may choose in building effective communication skills. The first cognitive basket contains receptive vocabulary word-blocks. Receptive vocabulary includes words which are understood in listening and reading. This basket contains the largest number of word blocks, because these words are heard or read in context, and the context surrounding the vocabulary words helps the listener or reader determine their meaning. When the meaning of a word stored in the receptive vocabulary basket is internalized to the extent that the student can make some use of the word in speaking and writing, the word block is transferred to the student's second cognitive basket. The second cognitive basket contains expressive vocabulary word blocks. Expressive vocabulary includes words which are used in speaking and writing. Students may make limited use of these words in speaking or writing. Often these words are used when their use is suggested by the classroom teacher or a peer. When a mastery level of understanding and use of a word is reached, the word block is transferred to the student's third cognitive basket. The third cognitive basket contains proprietary vocabulary word blocks which the student retrieves and uses automatically and frequently in speaking and writing.

Although the traditional three-step approach to vocabulary development (look up the word, copy the definition, and write a sentence in which the word is used correctly) provides exposure to new words, word blocks may remain in their students' second cognitive basket, and students' proprietary vocabulary may not be increased. Teachers should encourage the transfer of word blocks to the third cognitive basket, so that students have a plethora of word blocks from which to choose to convey their thoughts to others. As Mark Twain said, "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Making the right choice is essential in effective communication. Repeated experience with and exposure to vocabulary in meaningful contexts will increase student discernment in selecting the right word blocks with which to build and will enable students to develop their communication ability. One way to provide for vocabulary development in meaningful contexts is through the use of creative experiences in thematic units.

Themes. Enjoyable and meaningful exposure to words may be enhanced through the development of themes. Themes are topics or units of interest on which student learning is focused. Themes may be content area or literature based. Examples of content area topics are in health, a unit on the human body; in science, a unit on jungle animals; and in social studies, a unit on patriotism. Literature units may be based on an author, a single book, a genre, or a theme. An example of a unit about an author would be a unit based on books written by Katherine Patterson. An example of a unit on a single book would be a unit based on the book *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry. A genre unit could be a poetry unit using books by Jack

Prelutsky, Shel Silverstein and other well-known children's poets. A thematic unit might be developed on survival, using books such as *The Cay* by Theodore Taylor and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell. Themes encourage the integration of learning across content areas. A choice of themes may be made using suggestions from curriculum guides, textbooks, or students in the class. Using a thematic approach in the classroom will provide an organizational structure for expanded experiences with new vocabulary within a meaningful context.

Creative experiences. The use of creative experiences as vehicles for exploring topics in thematic units is stressed by Pappas et al. (1990). Taking advantage of students' enthusiasm for art, teachers may provide a variety of creative experiences to involve students actively in the acquisition of proprietary vocabulary. Participation in art activities using a variety of media and media techniques makes learning exciting as students illustrate the meanings and use of vocabulary words in novel and original ways. Participation in music activities will enable students to sing, as well as compose, lyrics for vocabulary songs. Creative activities allow student work to be shared, published, and displayed, and students are rescued from the doldrums of the dittos and drills approach to learning.

Students learn through their senses. Active participation in a variety of art activities provides students with sensory experiences involving the learning modalities of seeing, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting. The arts provide for learning through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modality strengths. Wankelman and Wigg (1989) found the use of creative art programs across content areas enriches academics. Participation in a variety of enjoyable and meaningful experiences and repeated exposure to the

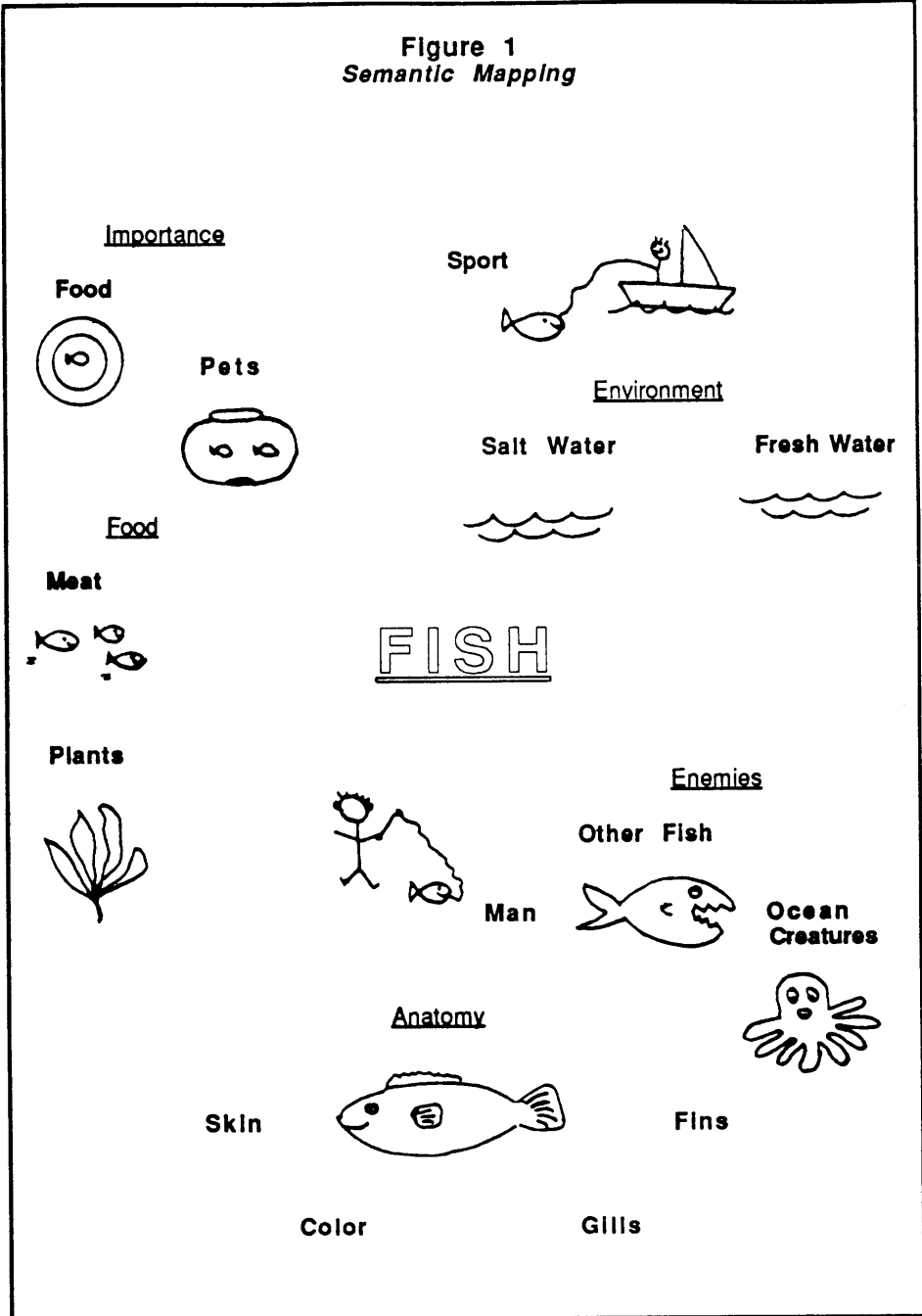
words in a variety of contexts facilitates vocabulary development (Hillerich, 1985; Tompkins and Hoskisson, 1991).

Instructional organization

Teachers, taught by the author, used *oceans* as a thematic focus. The steps followed for stimulating elementary students' acquisition of proprietary vocabulary were: 1) choose a theme and related vocabulary appropriate to the elementary grade level; 2) provide a variety of creative experiences. The grade level of each teacher determined specific vocabulary selection, creative activities, and literature book choices. Areas for which activities were designed included: semantic mapping, synonyms, homophones, multiple meaning words, idioms, propaganda, sentence expansion, and poetry. Examples of creative experiences used by teachers are included in the following sections.

Semantic mapping. Thematic planning may be aided through the development of a semantic map. A semantic map is a graphic organizer on which the central topic forms a nucleus and categories related to that topic radiate out from the nucleus forming a web. As students brainstorm about information to put on the map, they pool their knowledge about the topic, activate prior knowledge and experiences related to the topic, and expand their knowledge of the topic. Vocabulary words are added to the map as reading, study and research by the class provide information for web expansion. Semantic mapping has been found to be a valuable strategy in vocabulary development, as the words are being taught 1) using examples linked to students' prior knowledge and experiences; 2) relating new vocabulary to background knowledge; 3) involving students in constructing meanings of new words; and 4) providing a rich basis for further reading and writing (Heimlich and Pittelman, 1986; Johnson Pittelman and Heimlich, 1986; Nagy, 1988).

Figure 1
Semantic Mapping



The development of a semantic map enabled students to represent visually, in a variety of creative ways, knowledge they currently possessed about the ocean or a related ocean topic. As new knowledge was gained, students added to their maps. To represent categories on their semantic maps pictorially, students used the technique *collage* that creates design by pasting scraps of paper and other materials to a surface. Some of the collage materials used were magazine pictures, wallpaper, construction paper, and scraps of fabric. Figure 1 shows a semantic map on fish, in an early stage of development.

Synonyms. The study of synonyms enabled students to become more discerning in expressing themselves clearly and precisely. Projects for publishing, displaying and sharing synonym projects included pop-up books and flap books, books with windows, doors and a variety of flaps that open. Synonym possibilities and answers for riddles were written on notches of pop-up books and under the flaps of flap books. Evans and Moore (1985) have information for making a variety of pop-up books and flap books. Developing hink-pinks for types of fish and ocean creatures was a popular synonym activity. Hink-pinks are riddles with two one-syllable rhyming words for the answer. Students made up their own hink-pinks by brainstorming a pair of rhyming words first, then making up a question stem to go with the pair. As students searched for synonyms to put in the question stem of their riddles, the thesaurus became a popular resource. Experts in hink-pinks progressed to hinky-pinkies, riddles with two two-syllable rhyming words for the answers. Examples: *Question:* What is a fish playground? *Answer:* Shark park; *Question:* What is incessant crustacean chatter? *Answer:* Crab blab; *Question:* What is a member of the ocean criminal underworld? *Answer:* Lobster mobster. Another synonym activity children

enjoyed was working with passages from children's literature in which words had been deleted. Children suggested word choices the author might have made. Then a comparison was made with the author's choice, and students discussed why the author might have made that particular word choice. Examples:

At the edge of the woods there was a pond, and there a minnow and a tadpole swam among the weeds. They were _____ friends. (Suggestions: good, best, happy; author's choice: inseparable)

The minnow too had grown and had become a _____ fish. (Suggestions: big, large, huge; author's choice: full-fledged) (Lionni, 1970)

Homophones. Composing homophone songs to be sung to familiar tunes provides young composers an experience in the correct use of homophones. Children learned to use lists of homophones and find those that related to oceans. Students enjoyed singing and composing songs and/or additional versus for songs. Example:

Fish-aphones (Tune: "Doe, Doe a Deer")

Mussels — shellfish are good to eat

Muscles — hurts when you exercise

Wail — a cry of deep distress

Whale — a fish of immense size

Roe — fish eggs are good to eat

Row — to paddle in a boat

Pole — a line to catch a fish

Poll — where people go to vote.

Multiple meaning words. Words often have more than one meaning. Johnson and Pearson (1984) noted poor readers had a problem with "word rigidity," knowing only one meaning for a word with multiple meanings.

To compose lyrics for songs, students used lists of words with multiple meanings and found those that related to oceans. Example:

Fishy Fun (Tune: "Turkey in the Straw")

Dive — to go down in the sea

Dive — to jump into a fray

Cast — to throw a net for fish

Cast — the people in a play

Bait — you use to catch a fish

Bait — to tease or to torment

Scales — the covering on a fish

Scales — get on; my weight I'll get

Idioms. Students searched for idiomatic expressions related to oceans. They illustrated the literal and figurative meanings of an expression using a variety of crayon and paint techniques found in Wankelman and Wigg (1989). Crayon pictures covered with a blue wash of tempera or watercolor paint were realistic in depicting underwater ocean scenes. An additional challenge was to write idiomatic expressions synonymously and have peers decode the expressions. Examples:

<u><i>Synonymous</i></u>	<u><i>Idiomatic</i></u>	<u><i>Illustration Possibility</i></u>
<i>Seek praise</i>	"Fish for compliments"	<i>Fisherman catching fish labeled with complimentary terms</i>
<i>Other matters requiring attention</i>	"Other fish to fry"	<i>Cook at stove with frying pan, piles of fish</i>
<i>Out of accustomed environment</i>	"Fish out of water"	<i>Fish with feet walking on land</i>

Propaganda. Developing commercials to sell ocean products provided a challenge for students. A submarine puppet theater with portholes offered a view of the performance of students and/or ocean puppets. Puppets were created from materials such as envelopes, paper bags, paper plates, popsicle sticks, and bathroom tissue rolls. Costumes were created from paper bags, boxes and construction paper. Commercials provided an opportunity to

play around with language and use alliteration and idiomatic expressions. Example: Duck selling crackers.

Do you "quave" quality quacks? In your quest for quality quacks, check out the Surgeon General's Report, developed by qualified quacks, in which these quacks discovered that eating your quota of quackers will improve your quacking quality. No longer will you hear "I don't want to hear a quack out of you!" in "one fowl swoop" you will have developed quality quacks.

Sentence expansion. Developing expanded sentences from noun/verb sentences provided an opportunity for students to use colorful adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases. Word banks were built on charts. Sentence expansion books were constructed. Sentences were illustrated with thumbprint pictures (Emberley 1977). On each succeeding page of the books illustrations and sentences became progressively more detailed. Here is an example:

<u>Describe?</u>	<u>Noun?</u>	<u>Verb?</u>	<u>How?</u>	<u>When?</u>	<u>Where?</u>	<u>Why?</u>
enormous	shark	swam	swiftly	yesterday	beneath	pursu-
white					waves	ing
						minnows

<u>Page#</u>	<u>Question</u>	<u>Sentence</u>
1	Noun/Verb?	A shark swam.
2	Describe noun	An enormous, white shark swam.
3	How?	An enormous, white shark swam swiftly.
4	When?	An enormous, white shark swam swiftly yesterday.
5	Where?	An enormous, white shark swam swiftly yesterday beneath the waves.
6	Why?	An enormous, white shark swam swiftly yesterday beneath the waves pursuing a school of minnows.

Poetry. Students enjoyed a variety of poetic experiences. Class and/or individual collections of poetry were published in accordion books and shape books made in the form of ocean creatures. Evans and Moore (1985) have

information for making a variety of shape and accordion books. Poetry was also displayed on mobiles, book marks and poetry cubes. Children sat in an author's chair to read their poetry. Teachers found that children were receptive to revising poetry and playing with word choices to make meaning more clear and precise, because the limited number of words required in writing poetry did not make the revision task cumbersome. Acrostic, cinquain, concrete, and diamante poetry was written in the shapes or on the shapes of ocean creatures. Examples:

Acrostic

C-rustaceans

R-ude

A-nxious

B-oisterous

S-inking

Concrete

waves wandering wistfully
whispering whirling waves.

Summary

Students participated enthusiastically in the creative experiences that were developed for the ocean unit. Teachers observed an increase in spontaneous oral and written use of vocabulary related to oceans. Often students would get caught up in the excitement of the vocabulary activities and expand the activity and use of vocabulary beyond that originally designed and planned by the teacher. Display of student work heightened interest in vocabulary, and students had a marvelous time in their creative, thematic adventure. The impact of words can be summarized as follows:

Words have a powerful influence on every aspect of our lives. Words can entertain or instruct us, anger or soothe us, excite or calm us, inspire or bore us, cheer or sadden us, enlighten or mislead us, confuse or amuse us! Words build bridges between people and pave roads for the flow of ideas. Words give us opportunities

to expand our minds, stretch our imaginations, and experience a sense of playfulness (Schevitz, 1982, ix).

This power of words makes it incumbent upon teachers to motivate students to continually acquire building blocks for their ever-expanding repertoire of proprietary vocabulary.

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