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# Making Wordsmiths

Beth Weir

*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean..."*  
(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 1872)

Templeton (1991) uses the term "wordsmith" to refer to language users conversant with and excited about their use of words as tools. Becoming a "wordsmith," developing a working knowledge of the English language and an interest in it is no mean feat. The Oxford English Dictionary lists 600,000 words as being employed by English speakers since the twelfth century; currently 450,000 are used. By way of contrast, the French language employs a third of this number and Russian, one quarter (Claiborne, 1989). Such a large corpus of English words, derived from the Indo-European, Germanic, French, Latin and Greek languages makes it possible to convey nuances and subtle shades of meaning through speech and writing. Most ideas have a number of forms of expression, each with a slightly different implication. For example, *ask*, *question* and *interrogate* respectively suggest an increasingly aggressive stance on the part of the speaker.

Three questions among many that suggest themselves to a language teacher when reflecting on making children comfortable using this rich storehouse of words are addressed here. Why is it important to have a rich vocabu-

lary? How does vocabulary development take place? What can happen in class to foster vocabulary growth?

### **Why is it important to have a rich vocabulary?**

Vocabulary knowledge is one of the factors consistently associated with ability to comprehend text readily (Anderson and Freebody, 1985; Davis, 1968). In other words, the larger the vocabulary of a learner, the better that learner's chances of becoming a fluent and competent reader. Conversely, the child with the impoverished vocabulary tends not to comprehend difficult text as readily (Hargis, Terhaar-Yonkers, Williams and Reed, 1988).

Given the positive nature of the relationship between word knowledge and facility with the reading process, it would appear the language teacher has only to instruct students in difficult vocabulary prior to reading to increase comprehension. However, research in vocabulary instruction does not support this commonsense assumption. For example, Nagy (1988/1989) in a review of studies in this area states:

*Imagine an experiment with two groups of students who are about to read a selection from a textbook. One group is given typical instruction on the meaning of some difficult words from the selection; the other group receives no instruction. Both groups are given passages to read and are tested for comprehension. Do the students who received the vocabulary instruction do any better on the comprehension test? Very often they do not. (p. 1).*

Pikulski (1989) offers three reasons why preteaching vocabulary may not improve comprehension. First, students do not have to know all the words in a selection to enjoy or understand it. Students who are not offered preteaching of vocabulary are thus not necessarily at a

disadvantage. Second, teaching a word is often redundant since the context of the story frequently allows the individual to ascertain the meaning. Third, instruction is sometimes superficial because too many words are introduced at once and the learner is not provided with any meaningful information about the vocabulary. Other authors (e.g., Blachowicz, 1987; Durkin, 1990) note that students are not frequently encouraged by the teacher to see the connection between the vocabulary activities and the act of reading. Thus, from the child's point of view, preteaching words is frequently an abstract and isolated exercise. Some insight into instructional approaches that will foster word knowledge and create wordsmiths can be gained from an understanding of how vocabulary development occurs.

### **How does vocabulary development take place?**

When students leave high school at approximately 17 years of age they know up to 80,000 words (Miller and Gildea, 1987). The average child, therefore, learns at the rate of 5000 words per year or 13 words per day. As no one teaches a child 13 words each day, much learning must be indirect. Although this vocabulary acquisition process is not fully understood, insights from research studies (e.g., Manzo and Sherk, 1971-1971; Miller and Gildea, 1987) suggest many words are acquired incidentally as a function of experience with them in intelligible contexts.

Words are labels for concepts. Initially, children learn words as labels for objects in their environment; *chair*, *bed*, *dog*, *rain*, for instance, are terms learned through experience with the item or event. Such understandings form the basis for knowledge about classes of objects or events; *chair* and *bed* lead to an awareness of the more inclusive notion of furniture, *dog* to an understanding about animals, *rain* to weather, etc. Commensurate with refinement of

understanding about conceptual hierarchies is an awareness of the interrelationship that exists between them. Thus, when the concept of corn is related to something else such as harvesting, what is known about harvesting corn is now a part of what is known about edible plants and agriculture. Ultimately, of course, vocabulary associated with concepts facilitates further conceptual growth and concomitant language growth (Eisner, 1991). For instance, understanding of the concepts of *judge*, *court*, *crime* is a prerequisite to awareness of the more abstract ideas of *justice* and *due process of the law*.

The process of learning can be characterized, therefore, as one of simultaneously refining, elaborating and labeling understandings about the world. Smith (1978) calls this *implicit knowledge* because it is not possible to make explicit the rules which govern the classification system developed. However, knowledge of conceptual hierarchies, also referred to as semantic networks, exists because they can be utilized and described. Adoption of the premise that our knowledge of language is governed by our conceptual understandings, coupled with evidence noted previously that considerable vocabulary is acquired informally, has consequences for the kind of instructional program put in place in an elementary classroom.

### **Fostering vocabulary growth**

Provision of varied activities that permit opportunity for students to gain the necessary experience to support conceptual growth and vocabulary knowledge is an obvious starting place for fostering word knowledge. The word *kneading*, for instance, as in *kneading bread*, is going to be learned much more readily if the child is permitted to undertake the activity. However, practical considerations, particularly at the higher grades, often confound the ideal of

matching direct experience and vocabulary. Classroom activities are frequently limited by time, safety and opportunity. Further, many concepts are abstract; *ecology* is not readily amenable to direct experience, for instance.

Given the difficulty of providing hands on activities, how is the teacher to help students add concepts and vocabulary simultaneously to their knowledge base? A number of approaches are available, all of which can be implemented across a regular class day; some can be used concurrently. While all activities are designed to foster word knowledge they are also aimed at helping children become wordsmiths — people who are interested and excited about the language.

**Instruction.** It is possible to teach words directly, particularly within the context of a reading lesson, and still embrace the principle that the concept supporting the word be introduced concomitantly with the vocabulary. Such a dictum requires understanding of how words should be selected for study and awareness of how to relate vocabulary to the concepts available to the student.

While it seems trite to say words selected should be meaningful, inasmuch as study of them yields some new understanding, studies suggest that in practice this is not always the case. For example, Stallman, Commeyras, Kerr, Reimer, Jimenez, Hartman and Pearson (1990) report students already know 70% of the words designated as “new” in the basals prior to reading the texts, suggesting that much preteaching of vocabulary is of marginal value.

How are words of relevance to the students to be selected for study? Authors (e.g., Pikulski, 1989) suggest one criteria the teacher may use is that the vocabulary exam-

ined enhances the meaning of the story. Pikulski notes, as an example, that in Russell Erickson's (1974) story *A Toad for Tuesday*, the toad finds it very "dreary" in the owl's home, lights a candle, and feels much better when the place has a warm glow. While children often infer from context that *dreary* means *dark*, the understanding is incomplete. *Dreary* is thus an ideal candidate for instruction.

An alternative to teacher selection is that of allowing students to select problematic or interesting words themselves for discussion and review. Noble (1981) reports such a strategy is particularly effective with students who have a limited reading vocabulary, probably because the child finds the words chosen appealing. This is a very significant factor as the empathetic response of the learner to a word is the best indication of how well a student will learn that word (Postman, Bruner and McGinnies, 1948).

Developing understandings about words that may be partially understood, and words which influence comprehension, should occur after a story reading has occurred. Primary among the reasons for such a practice is that the child then has access to a rich conceptual base — that used to comprehend the story — to identify new vocabulary. This permits deep cognitive processing; a careful definition of the word in the context in which it was used; and relating the meaning of the word to other meanings and own experiences. All of these factors are associated with retention of information and learning (Stahl and Vancil, 1985). To return to *dreary* as a word for discussion to illustrate this process, post reading vocabulary activity could consist initially of asking the children for synonyms in context:

*"As long as I am here, I would like to make myself comfortable," said Wharton. "Do you mind if I light some candles? It seems very dreary in here."*

As previously noted, *dark* is an obvious substitute. However, children could be encouraged to experiment with alternatives such as *dull* or *sad*, that also represent the meaning of *dreary*. Students could then be encouraged to contrast the feeling of the house before and after candle lightings, to emphasize the fact that *dreary* is descriptive of atmosphere as well as physical characteristics. Finally, the students could be asked to apply the word to other contexts (e.g., a dreary day, dreary colors), describing what they think is intended by the expressions. Any personal recollections relating to the word *dreary* should be solicited also.

Such related activities go beyond the accurate or definitional response to words typical of traditional instruction (Blachowicz, 1987). They help students gain a deep understanding of the word by folding it into a conceptual base. Additionally, the student is permitted to see the coherence of a reading lesson, as the value of the word study is self evident. Finally, such lengthy discussion adds to appreciation or understanding of the narrative itself and may have the unintended but positive effect of clarifying meanings of other words not under review.

**Story time.** An informal approach to vocabulary development is story telling. Recent evidence (Elley, 1989; Bracey, 1989) suggests oral story reading, particularly multiple readings of the same story with younger children, is a significant source of information about words. Such is the case regardless of whether the stories are accompanied by teacher explanation of word meanings or read without comment. Greater increases in word knowledge occurs, though, when discussion of the narrative does take place.

Older children should be provided opportunity to read silently on a regular basis. Studies (e.g., Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; Nagy, Anderson and Herman, 1987) suggest students acquire a large number of words from context in normal reading; a typical fifth grader learns about 1,000 words in this fashion, for example.

**Modeling.** One of the more powerful vehicles for introducing children to new words is teacher modeling of vocabulary (Haggard, 1980). Modeling involves provision of a word unknown to the students in social discourse. For example, when the class gerbil vigorously chews on some hard material the teacher may comment on how the animal likes to *gnaw*. Eliciting the word from the children in ongoing conversation will help establish the concept and the commensurate label. Subsequent use of the word in other contexts throughout the day will allow students opportunity to begin to own the word themselves.

A second approach to modeling is to elaborate on comments made by children during instruction. For instance, during reading or storytelling, discussion may center on the traits of the main character. If the character has been described in the narrative as "mean" or "bad tempered," this is how the children will be likely to characterize him if asked. A teacher can extend such comments with a remark like "He certainly was an irritable, unpleasant man; I agree with you." While children may not immediately pick up on the new vocabulary (*irritable, unpleasant*) they are being provided with one of the multiple exposures to a word required for acquisition of new vocabulary (Deighton, 1960; McKeown, Beck, Osmanson, and Perfetti, 1983). Some words employed by the teacher are adopted by students because they sound adult or have an appealing sound. Curiosity is piqued, leading to

purposeful learning of the vocabulary on the part of a child. This is particularly the case when dealing with upper elementary grade children (Haggard, 1980). Haggard cites the words *deign*, *foibles*, and *fickle* as being learned by students for these reasons. Such a finding is justification for the teacher to use, within an appropriate, meaningful context, vocabulary that may seem on the surface to be too difficult for the given student(s).

**Use of cultural and academic trivia.** A practice that could be incorporated while modeling words, although it does stand alone as an approach, is to provide what Manzo and Sherk (1971-72) characterize as cultural and academic trivia to support the learning process. For example, many English words can be traced to the myths from the ancient Graeco-Roman world. Two examples follow; one for use in general vocabulary development, the other in science.

*In Greek mythology, Pan, the god of the flocks, fashioned and played a reed flute. He was half man and half goat and despite being a minor character in the pantheon of gods was well known. He could cause unreasonable fear in people, making them do things that were self-destructive. The word panic is derived from Pan.*

*Arachne, according to Greek mythology, was a very skilled weaver who was challenged by the Greek goddess Athene to a weaving contest. Athene became enraged during the course of the competition at the beautiful scenes her opponent was creating and declared herself the winner. Arachne was humiliated and hanged herself, but Athene spared her life by turning her into a spider (arachnid). It is in this form that creatures named for Arachne continue to weave today.*

Such an approach which involves formally describing the etymology of words to students presupposes a signifi-

cant background knowledge on the part of the teacher. However, given that the teacher's attitude toward vocabulary improvement is a contagious and vital factor in improving student vocabulary (Rausch, 1969) such an approach has much merit. There are a number of publications available (e.g., Morris, 1988) that could serve as resource material both for the student and the teacher.

**Dramatization.** Authors (Eisner, 1991; Gardner, 1985; Ward, 1981) who write in support of dramatization as a curriculum offering argue this physical/kinesthetic, visual/spatial mode of communication is frequently more appropriate for learners than the traditional linguistic mode. In other words, children ascribe meaning to experience more readily when they can physically act upon it in some way, rather than just talk about it. This is particularly the case for younger learners. In addition to providing children with another way of knowing, drama incorporates and facilitates traditional ways of knowing. "Through drama, the action and visual elements support and reinforce verbal language, creating a multiple imprint on the learner's memory" (Brown, 1990, p. 27). Vitz (1983) reports a review of empirical studies that support this claim, indicating that oral language and reading skills are improved significantly when linked with dramatic activity.

How is drama used for vocabulary acquisition? For this purpose drama is to serve the players, not an audience. Thus, the activities should require no special talent, be informal and spontaneous, and provide the students with an opportunity to express meaning. Stories that contain many verbs are an obvious medium for work in this area; *The Giant Who Threw Tantrums*, by David L. Harrison (1977) is one such narrative. It is a tale of a giant who wrecks havoc because he is frustrated by his inability to whistle. Words

from the story that warrant investigation in a dramatic mode are *whirled, puckered, slurping* and *bounced*. Children could simply be asked to very quickly act out, either individually or as a group, the various verbs named during the time devoted to vocabulary development or during ongoing discussion of the story.

Informal dramatization of whole stories for an audience also provides opportunity for vocabulary growth. For example, preparation for visual/spatial interpretation of a character and that character's activities would entail consideration of the traits to be portrayed. This could involve the teacher introducing terms during discussion; *miserly, loquacious, overbearing, opinionated*, for instance, that describe the characteristics to be represented. If players are using dialogue, often a previously unknown term such as *embarrassed* or *splendor* can be incorporated into the presentation in such a way as to be meaningful for the participants. This is important since retention is associated with use of words (Eicholz and Barbe, 1969).

Dramatic experiences provide the teacher opportunity to enhance the audience's awareness of vocabulary as well. Through the performance, the children have a model for many of the terms introduced. Thus they can benefit from hearing the vocabulary in discussion after a play has been presented since reference to (and perhaps replay of) the events can be made to support the word. Frazier (1973) claims that for experience to have been fully experienced, it must be worked through in terms of language. Certainly drama is one experience that can be extended and clarified with language.

**Writing.** Duin and Graves (1987) report a study in which intensive and elaborated vocabulary instruction was

offered prior to writing. Learners were then encouraged to use the target words in their compositions. The authors report significantly higher gains in both the knowledge of the words and the quality of the writing for those students who were exposed to in depth word processing procedures as compared to those students who were offered traditional instruction in vocabulary. Of equal importance is the very high interest in learning in general and enthusiasm for learning words in particular exhibited by the experimental group.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Making children wordsmiths should be a significant curriculum focus. Attention to having children gain in knowledge of and excitement about words can be justified simply on pragmatic grounds. A positive relationship exists between the quality of the vocabulary exhibited by a learner and reading competency. More important, though, is the fact that learning about words creates an enthusiasm not only about vocabulary but about the learning process itself.

Reports suggest current teaching approaches do not support the instructional climate needed to create wordsmiths. Direct instruction of a vocabulary within the context of a reading lesson is often ineffective. In depth processing of a few key words selected by both the teacher and the student after reading are suggested as appropriate teaching strategies.

However, since so few words of the total vocabulary acquired by a child are learned directly, an additional role played by the teacher is that of creating an environment that will facilitate the informal learning process. One way this can be achieved is by provision of different activities that permit students to process word meanings in relation to a

conceptual base. Many approaches with this aim, e.g., reflection on the etymology of a new word and dramatic response to a story, enhance existing classroom activity and do not entail structural changes to a program. They are thus easily implemented. The return on such additions to the learning process is considerable as children begin to recognize words as intellectual tools — in short, begin the process of being a wordsmith.

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