

10-1-1982

Expanding Children's Vocabulary

Frederick A. Duffelmeyer
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Duffelmeyer, F. A. (1982). Expanding Children's Vocabulary. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 23 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol23/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

EXPANDING CHILDREN'S VOCABULARY

Frederick A. Duffelmeyer

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

The positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension is widely acknowledged. Thus, one of the responsibilities facing our schools is systematic guidance in vocabulary development. Carroll (1964) stated this obligation in strong terms: "The teaching of words, and of the meanings and concepts they designate or convey, is one of the principal tasks of teachers at all levels of education" (p. 26).

The lesson plans contained in the teacher's manuals of most basal reader series reflect the emphasis placed on vocabulary development. Suggested activities for building vocabulary almost invariably precede the reading of a selection as part of the "Preparation for Reading" stage of a typical reading lesson. Additionally, it is not uncommon for there to be a vocabulary exercise of some sort as part of the "Skill Development" stage of a lesson after a selection has been read and discussed.

Even though this "sandwich" arrangement is fairly prevalent, the vocabulary-building content of the two stages is seldom related. The absence of a link between the vocabulary material that precedes and follows the reading of a selection amounts to ignoring a fundamental principle of learning; namely, that learning involves relating new experience to what is already known. Failure to do this results in what Smith (1975) refers to as nonsense or noise, i.e., "...a signal that conveys no information, and which therefore cannot be interpreted" (p. 31).

This article describes an instructional technique for expanding children's vocabulary which embodies the learning principle above. The technique is used during the "Skill Development" stage of a basal reading lesson, and presupposes the introduction of new words during the "Preparation for Reading" stage. It will be presented in terms of a planning phase, a teaching phase, and an application phase.

Planning Phase

The planning phase consists of three steps:

- Step 1. Determine which words introduced during the "Preparation stage can be readily used as a basis for generating synonyms and/or antonyms. In terms of the learning principle mentioned above, these words are what is already known.

Step 2. Generate either a synonym or an antonym from each of the "Preparation for Reading" words identified in Step 1. In generating synonyms and antonyms, two guidelines to keep in mind are a) to generate words which are common enough to be useful, and b) to generate words that are likely to be unfamiliar and will represent an expansion of children's vocabulary; so as to represent the new experience.

A sample output of Original and Generated words might be: famous—renowned, talent—aptitude, flop—triumph, intact—deteriorated.

Step 3. Formulate two context-rich sentences for each generated word. A sample output on completion of Step 3 might be:

1. Babe Ruth is renowned for his home run record.
2. If you became President of the United States, you would be renowned.
3. A clown has an aptitude for making people laugh.
4. The repairman has an aptitude for fixing machines.
5. Learning how to ski was one of my greatest triumphs.
6. Becoming a doctor was quite a triumph for the blind man.
7. The building where my dad went to school is old and deteriorated.
8. Many of the houses in the downtown area need repairing because they are deteriorated.

Teaching Phase

For each generated word, the teacher follows these steps:

1. Pronounces the word while pointing to it. Because the meaning of the word is supposedly unfamiliar to the students, it is not appropriate to expect them to figure out its pronunciation.
2. Instructs the students to read a context-rich sentence which contains the word. Once the students have some notion as to the word's meaning, they are ready for the next step.
3. Asks the students to tell which "Preparation for Reading" stage word it is a synonym or antonym for. (The "Preparation for Reading" words should be listed in random order in the vicinity of the sentences.) This is a critical point in the instructional sequence, where new experience is being related to what is already known.

Application Phase

After the generated words have been introduced in this manner the teacher presents the students with the context-rich sentences that were not used during the teaching phase. Unlike the sentences used during the teaching phase, however, the generated words have been omitted, and replaced by blank spaces. The students are to complete each sentence with the appropriate generated word. This activity provides the students with an opportunity to apply their newly acquired knowledge in a meaningful setting, which in itself is an important learning principle. A sample worksheet for this phase might look like the following:

1. Becoming a doctor was quite a _____ for the blind man.

2. Many of the houses in the downtown area need repairing because they are _____.
3. If you became President of the United States, you would be _____.
4. The repairman has an _____ for fixing machines.
renowned triumph aptitude deteriorated

Additional Comments

In addition to incorporating the principle of relating new experience to what is already known, this technique possesses at least two other commendable features:

a) According to O'Rourke (1974), the study and use of synonym and antonym helps students to classify and generalize concepts.

b) The ultimate purpose in reading is to gain meaning, and as Farr and Roser (1979) have stated, "...using context analysis is using meaning to get more meaning" (p. 188).

The instructional techniques described illustrate ways in which the principle of relating new experience to what is already known can be applied to teaching word meaning. Hopefully, it will result in meaningful as opposed to rote learning, thus improving the probability of retrieval and use.

REFERENCES

- Carroll, John B. "Words, Meanings and Concepts." Harvard Review, vol. 34, no. 2 (Spring 1964), pp. 178-202.
- Farr, Roger, and Nancy Roser. Teaching a Child to Read. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1979.
- O'Rourke, Joseph P. Toward a Science of Vocabulary Development. The Hague: Mouton & Company N.V., Publishers, 1974.
- Smith, Frank. Comprehension and Learning. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.