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Selecting Words for Instruction During Primary Read-alouds

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Abstract

Reading aloud is a wide-spread practice in early childhood and primary classrooms that is purported to develop a range of literacy skills, including vocabulary. Since it is not feasible to teach all of the words in a given text, efforts to maximize the instructional power of read-aloud events have included research regarding word selection. This study explores the extent to which research-based practices for selecting words for instruction have been incorporated into the practices of four primary grade teachers. Findings indicate that teachers may rely more on intuition and personal experience to select words rather than following expert's recommendations. Implications for practice, teacher preparation programs, and further research are discussed.



Selecting Words for Instruction During Primary Read-alouds

Reading aloud to children is commonly accepted as a means of building vocabulary, particularly with emergent and beginning readers (Biemiller & Boote, 2006) and is a recommended practice in early childhood classrooms (International Reading Association [IRA] & the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1998). Although there is a preponderance of empirical research findings supporting vocabulary development during read-alouds (e.g., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Justice, Meier, & Walpole, 2005; Senechal, 1997; Wasik & Blewitt, 2006), little is known about how practitioners have incorporated this knowledge base into their practices and whether vocabulary instruction is actually improving (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003) for the children in greatest need of support.

This exploratory study builds on the existing research in the field by examining the words selected for instruction during read-alouds by four primary teachers along with the rationale for their choices. While there were many points of convergence between the literature and the teachers' practices, there were also significant discrepancies between published guidelines, observed instruction, and the teachers' own perceptions of their practice. Exploring such discrepancies between research and practice provides the foundation for meaningful, relevant research in the future with implications for practice and pre-service teacher education.

Perspectives on Word Selection

Determining which words in a particular text to target for instruction requires considerable thought (Vukelich & Christie, 2009), and teachers need to have "a principled basis for identifying the words that should be targeted for vocabulary instruction" (Nagy & Hiebert, 2011, p. 388). Research continues in the field, but a theory to guide word selection does not exist at this time (Nagy & Hiebert, 2011). What we do have are general guidelines that support teachers in making critical instructional decisions.

In the most recent volume of the *Handbook of Reading Research*, Nagy and Hiebert (2011) identified four factors that impact word selection. First, teachers should consider the word's role in language. Does it appear frequently?

Does it appear in many kinds of texts, or only in certain content areas? Secondly, teachers should consider how the word relates to other words semantically and morphologically. Teachers should also consider the students' current knowledge about the word as well as its conceptual difficulty. The final factor is more pragmatic and suggests that teachers consider the word's role in the lesson, the particular text being read, and in the curriculum as a whole.

Many articles and professional resources have been published to guide the selection of words for vocabulary instruction, authored by some of the leading researchers in the field including Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, Linda Kucan, Michael Graves, and Andrew Biemiller. The guidelines are general in order to be applicable to a variety of instructional contexts. Factors that influence word selection typically include utility, relevance, and concept load. These factors might be framed within the following questions to guide teachers in the decision-making process:

- Is understanding the word important to understanding the selection in which it appears?
- Are students able to use context or structural analysis skills to discover the word's meaning?
- Can working with this word be useful in furthering students' context, structural-analysis, or dictionary skills?
- How useful is this word outside the reading selection currently being taught? (Graves, 2006, p. 68).

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) recommended similar criteria. Words selected for instruction should have importance and utility. Words might be selected based on instructional potential, such as introducing a specific morpheme. Finally, words that are somewhat familiar to the students but require further conceptual development are recommended. Their well-known model for categorizing vocabulary words consists of three tiers. Tier 1 words are common, everyday words that seldom need instruction. Tier 3 words are domain specific, academic language that might best be taught during content area instruction. Beck and colleagues suggested that teachers focus instruction on Tier 2 words, which are of "high frequency for mature language users" (2002, p. 8).

Graves et al. (2014) developed the Selecting Words for Instruction from Texts (SWIT) approach which suggests a focus on “essential words, valuable words, accessible words, and imported words” (p. 336). Essential words are those deemed critical for comprehension of a particular text. Valuable words are those with general utility, and accessible words are relatively common words that are likely unknown to children with limited vocabulary. Imported words are not found directly in the text, but enhance comprehension. Examples in this category are words representing key concepts and discipline specific vocabulary.

In addition to the characteristics of words described above, there are instructional factors that need to be considered when selecting words. Time is a salient factor in vocabulary instruction, particularly in the context of read-alouds, where the balance between effective instruction and an engaging, enjoyable reading can be difficult to achieve. Frequent or prolonged digressions to talk about word meaning can disrupt the flow of the story to the point where children lose interest. Stead (2014) suggested that, “having to stop every two minutes to explain new vocabulary compromises comprehension retention and pleasure” (p. 491) so teachers must consider the number of unfamiliar words and the amount of time needed to teach them when planning read-alouds. At the same time, word learning for many children is minimal without such focused attention (Elley, 1989). Children’s vocabulary develops best when their learning is guided by complex and open-ended prompts about word meaning (Wasik & Hindman, 2011). Longo and Curtis (2008) recommended choosing words that “help students to develop the most precise understanding possible in the time you have available” (p. 24). Teachers should consider a word’s importance and utility. Words that will be encountered in multiple contexts and the content areas are good choices, as are words that develop conceptual knowledge or allow students to express finer gradations of meaning.

In addition to general guidelines for word choice, several published word lists are available to teachers to guide their selections. Biemiller (1999) constructed a list of 2300 common root words, stating that “it would be desirable to have most children familiar with most (90%) of the words on this list by the end of grade 2 or 3” (p. 60). Biemiller updated this list to include 5,000 root words that 40-60% of students in kindergarten through sixth grade would likely know (2009). Other word lists include those developed by Fry (2004), Dale and O’Rourke (1981), and Chall and Dale (1995). These lists might serve to validate selections made using other criteria. More recently,

guidance can be found in word lists published by Graves and Sales (2012), Hiebert (2012), and Marzano (2004). Academic vocabulary lists by Coxhead (2000) and Gardner and Davies (2013) provide teachers guidance when selecting academic words for instruction.

Despite the availability of such expert recommendations for practice, teachers continue to struggle with word selection. In fact, teachers indicated on a survey conducted by Berne and Blachowicz (2008) that word selection is one of their top concerns regarding vocabulary instruction, indicating that the bridge between research and practice is not as robust as it needs to be. It is not clear at this time whether the problem is due to teachers' lack of familiarity with the literature, or the need for more precise and clear guidelines for choosing words.

Vocabulary Development through Read-alouds

In this study, word selection is positioned within the specific context of read-alouds, and thus a brief discussion of that literature is warranted. Read-alouds are recommended practice for young children (IRA & NAEYC, 1998) and are an effective vehicle for vocabulary development (i.e., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Justice et al., 2005; Senechal, 1997; Wasik & Blewitt, 2006). Although read-alouds are common in preschool and primary classrooms, recent research suggests that the quality of such experiences varies considerably from classroom to classroom (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Kindle, 2011). Teacher decisions regarding words selected and instructional strategies within read-alouds reflect understanding about teaching and learning and can “enhance or limit learning opportunities” (Lennox, 2013, p. 383). Interactional styles adopted by teachers can encourage reflection on word meaning (Look and the picture and tell me what you think this word means) or be used more as an assessment (What does this word mean?) (Kindle, 2011).

Read-alouds provide the means to expose children to rich and varied vocabulary (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988), and children with strong language skills and vocabulary can learn many words through brief, incidental exposures. Children with less robust vocabulary require more explicit instruction on word meanings to benefit from such experiences (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Fein et al., 2011; Justice et al., 2005; Loftus, Coyne, Zipoli, & Pullen, 2010). Opportunities to review new words and encounter them in

multiple contexts throughout the day result in more complete word knowledge (Kindle, 2009, 2010; Neuman & Dwyer, 2009).

It is important for teachers to understand the differential effects of read-alouds when planning instruction, both in terms of specific instructional strategies, and in word selection. While teachers are often encouraged to select Tier 2 words (Beck et al., 2002), for some groups of children there may be a need to address the more commonly encountered words of Tier 1.

Methodology

The purposes of this exploratory study were 1) to identify the words teachers selected for instruction within read-alouds in their classrooms; and 2) to explore the teachers' rationales for word selection. Classroom observations were conducted to identify which words were given instructional attention during the read-alouds and semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' rationales for word selection. Primary grade teachers were recruited from a private elementary school located in a middle-class suburb in the south-central United States. Through conversations with the principal, the researcher knew that daily read-alouds were encouraged in the school, and thus would be familiar routines for both teachers and students. The purpose of the study and expectations for the read-aloud observations were explained to the teachers in the consent documents. Additionally, the researcher met with the teachers individually to answer any questions they might have. One kindergarten (Barbara), one first grade (Patricia), and two second grade teachers (Cindy and Debby) agreed to participate in the study (all names are pseudonyms). The teachers varied greatly in years of experience. Debby, a retired public school teacher, was the most experienced with over 20 years in the classroom, primarily at the middle school level. Barbara was also a veteran with 10 years of experience in kindergarten. Patricia and Cindy were relative novices. Patricia was in her third year of teaching and Cindy was in the internship year of an alternative licensure program.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each teacher was observed four times over a six week period as they read-aloud to their students. In order to keep the read-alouds as authentic as possible, the researcher did not provide any input or suggestions as to which books might be read aloud. A list of titles read can be found in the reference section. Observations were roughly one hour in length and times were

scheduled at the convenience of the teachers in order to have the read-alouds be as typical as possible. All observations were digitally recorded and field notes were taken to capture additional data such as facial expressions and gestures. Recordings were transcribed and field notes were added to create a thick description of the read-aloud events (Carspecken, 1996).

Data analysis was recursive. As the transcriptions were read and preliminary themes began to emerge, a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was developed to obtain information not directly observable (Merriam, 2001) such as teachers' rationales for word choice, understandings about use of read-alouds to develop vocabulary, and instructional strategies. For each topic, a lead-off question was developed and covert categories were identified. Covert categories are topics that the researcher hopes to discuss, but avoids explicit questions about in order to avoid leading the interview (Carspecken, 1996).

Following the transcription and initial coding of the interview transcripts, the observation data were again read and coded with further refinement due to insights gleaned from the interviews. Peer review of the data and coding occurred at several points: initial coding, development of the protocol, and final coding.

Results and Discussion

The focus of this exploratory study was to examine the ways that four primary teachers selected words for instruction during read-alouds. However, a brief description of the read-alouds practices of each teacher provides important context through which to interpret their choices. The four teachers in this study varied a great deal in both the total number of words selected for instruction over the course of the four observations as well as the number of words within individual read-alouds. Given the differences in purpose (instructional versus aesthetic), age (K-2), time allotted (15-45 minutes), and texts, quantitative comparisons between the teachers are not particularly meaningful. However, the data do contribute to the description of the practices of the teachers, and suggest some general patterns of teacher behavior. Table 1 details the words selected for instruction in each of the observations.

Cindy (Grade 2) typically reads aloud twice per day to her students. One is part of reading instruction as she reads aloud the novel that is selected for the

Table 1: Words Selected for Instruction During Read-alouds

	Cindy Grade 2	Debby Grade 2	Patricia Grade 1	Barbara Grade K
Observation 1	plain, bonnet	Parachute, gadget, life preserver, diving suit, shame, hoists, pulleys, crossbow	Pout, encyclopedia, famine, dye, discovered, questioned, research	Bit, lots, rest, glob, blob
Observation 2	Premises, frankfurters, rivers of spit, whizzpopper, vigorously	Prairie, hearthstone, dough, bonnet, mild-mannered, plain	leper	Chore, espresso beans, kinder, gentler, valid ID, protested, recount, governor, diner, town meetings, ballot, vice president, help wanted ad,
Observation 3		Plow, squall, hail, still, sly, hiss, pungent, bleating, flattened	Appalachia, folk tale	Collect, lend, mitten, buttons
Observation 4	Roamer, batted, meadowlark, dried flowers, rose velvet ribbon, rustle, wooly ragwort, kittywake, prairie	Left, langwitch, guogwinkles, chittering, oftenly, squibbling, titchy, dory- hunky, snorkles	Partner, glare, cuffs	Apron, lad, pester, stewing, sweet, choosy

unit to her students. The second read-aloud is less formal and intended to increase the students' enjoyment of reading.

Debby (Grade 2) is a veteran teacher with 20 years of experience teaching 8th grade. This was her first year to teach second grade. Debby and Cindy, as the two second grade teachers of the school, select the novels they are going to read together. Like Cindy, she has both an instructional read-aloud and a second that is “just for fun”.

Patricia (Grade 1) has a few years of experience teaching preschool, but this was her first year to teach first grade. Patricia often adopted a performance style of reading, which accounts for the lower numbers of words selected for instruction. Patricia also opted to use a story telling approach for her second observation, retelling two parables.

Barbara (Kindergarten) has ten years of experience teaching. Her style of reading is highly interactional, with extended discussion during reading and frequent stops to clarify, questions, and elaborate.

Word Selection: Intentionality and Spontaneity

The teachers in this study did not articulate a clearly defined set of criteria used to select target words for instruction during their read-alouds; however, through the observations and interviews, patterns of behavior and insight into their thought processes emerged. Two major criteria for word selection became evident during coding procedures: (1) the teacher's perceptions of the importance of the word, and (2) the teacher's perception of the degree of students' prior word knowledge. These criteria were positioned within the larger themes of intentionality and spontaneity.

Word Importance. Words were perceived as important for a variety of reasons. As Graves (2006) suggests, the teachers did choose words on the basis of their significance to comprehension of the story. Some words were intentionally selected because of their relevance to the theme or content area currently being studied, consistent with Graves' concept of word utility (2006). Two additional reasons for targeting words that are not included in Graves' guidelines emerged from the data: immediate utility and student interest. Words were often a focus on instruction when they had immediate utility and would be needed for an assignment following the read-aloud. This is somewhat different from the concept of utility described in the literature that centers on a word's

general utility rather than on the very specific practical utility of a subsequent assignment. Teachers were also very responsive to student interest in specific words. While a word may not have been initially targeted for instruction, the teachers spontaneously addressed student questions about word meanings during the read-alouds.

Important for comprehension. Teaching every unfamiliar word in a particular text is not feasible, so teachers prioritize words that are deemed critical to comprehension. In her interview, Debby stated, “I think that if it’s a word that definitely they need to understand in order to get the meaning – um, because some of them are just like descriptive words that if they don’t quite get it, it’s ok. But if it really has some kind of meaning to the whole story, then I need to stop and make sure that they understand it.” Words that were essential for comprehension were selected for instruction while those considered less important might be passed over altogether or dealt with in a cursory manner.

Important for content relevance. Books for read-alouds are often selected because of their connection to instructional themes or units (Kindle, 2008). In these cases, vocabulary that is related to the content or themes would be a natural choice. For example, Barbara does a thematic unit on butterflies each year. She selects non-fiction texts for read-alouds, focusing on content vocabulary such as larva and chrysalis to develop children’s understanding of these terms.

Cindy talked about the importance of selecting words based on their relevance to current events and the social studies curriculum.

Cindy: For example, right now we’re reading The Kid Who Ran for President (Gutman, 2000). So we’re looking at words like ballot, and to register, and Republican, and Democrat. And I think it’s really important, especially now with what’s going on right now in the nation – for them to understand what these words mean so that they know what’s going on and they’re educated as far as what’s happening.

Important for assignments. Teachers often integrate writing assignments with read-alouds (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004), and such assignments impact word selection. In this study, Cindy and Debby were both observed as they introduced the novel *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985)

to their classes. The different nature of their follow-up writing activity influenced their word selection decisions.

Cindy planned for her students to use the text *I am plain and tall* as a pattern for writing descriptive statements about themselves; thus, more than definitional knowledge would be required. Children needed to understand the function of the word *plain* as a descriptor of Sarah's appearance.

Cindy: Now Sarah said plain. What do you think plain means?

By imagining how she looks, she says plain.

Following Debby's introduction to the same text, she asked students to use visualization skills and draw a picture of what Sarah looked like when she got off the train. She also discussed the word *plain*, but was far more focused on the word *bonnet* so the children would create accurate depictions of Sarah.

In a subsequent chapter, Debby's post-reading assignment included drawing a picture of a storm and writing a description. As she read the chapter, she focused on words that were related to the task such as *squall*, *pungent*, *still*, *hail*, and *flattened*. She wrote the words on the board for students to use during their writing.

In these representative examples, word selection was influenced by immediate utility rather than the more general utility suggested by the literature (Beck, et al., 2002; Graves, 2006). By drawing attention to the words during the read-aloud, the teachers increased the likelihood that students would incorporate the new words into their writing. Opportunities for such authentic use of new vocabulary facilitate the acquisition of novel words into students' expressive vocabularies, which is an important word-learning task (Graves, 2006).

Important to students. Students in all observed classes asked questions about the meaning of words, exhibiting word consciousness, defined by Graves (2006) as "the awareness of and interest in words and their meanings" (p. 119, stress in the original). When students ask questions, they demonstrate their active engagement with the text and the construction of meaning. The teachers, who responded with definitions, synonyms, and examples, honored such spontaneous queries. Even though the exchanges were not planned, student interest was sufficient to engage in discussion, however brief. For example, when reading the end matter of *Leonardo and the Flying Boy* (Anholt, 2007), Debby mentioned the word *crossbow*.

Debby: (reading text) Salai met a predictable, reckless end when he was killed by a crossbow.

Student: What's a crossbow?

Debby: Like a bow and arrow only this way (making a horizontal motion with her hand)

While listening to Barbara read *The Bear's Picnic* (Berenstain, 1996), a student asked for the meaning of the word *lad*. Barbara reminded the students that they had seen the word in another story and asked them to recall the meaning. After a few wrong guesses, a student suggested that a *lad* is a boy. Barbara confirmed the correct response, provided additional information, and contextualized the definition within the current read-aloud.

Barbara: Lily had lion cubs that were named Lass and Lad, and Lad means a boy. Lass means a girl. So Papa Bear has called Small Bear "lad".

Cindy regularly incorporated student selection of words into her instructional routine. This practice is consistent with the research suggesting that student selection of words increases learning (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). After reading each chapter, students were asked for words to add to an ongoing vocabulary chart. Students suggested words and phrases from the text that were then discussed and a few words were added to the class list to be looked up in the dictionary at a later time. Graves (2006) suggests that opportunities to practice dictionary use should be a factor in word selection, which confirms that Cindy's practice aligns well with the literature.

In all of these examples, teachers responded to student interest in word meaning. In her interview, Debby explained that is difficult to anticipate which words the students will and will not know. She is pleased that her students monitor their own comprehension and will ask questions if there are words they don't understand, interpreting this behavior as evidence of motivation and active learning.

Importance of context. The ability to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words from context is an important skill for young readers to develop. Using context clues is "probably the most frequently used reading strategy for determining the meaning of an unknown word" (Newton, Padak, & Rasinski, 2008, p. 7). When teachers select words for instruction that are presented in highly supportive contexts and model the strategies for using that context to determine word meaning, they help their students develop this skill

and encourage them to use this strategy independently, which in effect reduces the number of words that must be directly taught (Graves, 2006).

Debby and Cindy seemed particularly aware of the importance of context clues. As second grade teachers with fairly independent readers, the emphasis on context clues makes sense. Both teachers reported considering the context when selecting words for instruction in order to provide meaningful practice for students.

Cindy: I also try to pick the words that they can figure out the meaning just by the context clues. If I repeat the sentences, they'll get it. And so those are – what I think the best words to pick out – cause then they can justify why it means that.

Debby's prior experience teaching older students was clearly a factor in her beliefs about the importance of context as a strategy for success on standardized achievement texts as well as for independent reading.

Debby: I think that [context clues] comes from the 8th grade because that's- you know – that's what we did. It was all context clues. And even on the TAKS test, you know – it was context clues and how do you look at the words around that word and figure out what it is. And I think that's a good strategy to use actually.

Degree of Prior Word Knowledge. Clearly, the most salient factor in word selection among the teachers in this study was whether they believed that their students knew the word. Given the variance in the number and type of words that children in any particular class might know (Biemiller, 1999, Graves & Slater, 1987), determining word knowledge is a complex task. Teachers must be well attuned to students' extant word knowledge to make informed choices. Teachers' selections are guided by an awareness of degrees of word knowledge, sensitivity to students' confusions, and experience with children.

Degrees of word knowledge. Word learning occurs incrementally as novel terms are encountered in various contexts over time (Cronbach, 1942; Dale, 1965; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Some words might be unfamiliar to all students in the class, but it is more likely that students' word knowledge will represent several stages or points along the continuum from partial to full knowledge. An exchange from Cindy's class illustrates the point.

Cindy: (reading text) **Far from the field, a meadowlark sang,**
too. What's a meadowlark? What's a meadowlark?
Nathan?

Nathan: An echo.

Cindy: No, not an echo.

Sarah: A bird?

Cindy: A bird. It's a kind of bird.

Nathan did not know the word meadowlark and incorrectly inferred a definition from the context. Sarah correctly identifies a meadowlark as a type of bird, although in this exchange it is not possible to determine whether this constitutes prior word knowledge or if the word sang helps her make that connection.

The teachers also developed new meanings for known words, one of the six word-learning tasks identified by Graves (2006). Two teachers specifically selected words (badger, bat, stew) that fell into this category. Multiple meaning words were often selected for instruction, indicating the teachers' awareness of the difficulty posed by alternate meanings.

Cindy: You know, we saw "badger" in The Kid Who Ran For President (Gutman, 2000). Well it's not the animal, it's to annoy. And so, I would say what does badger mean – well it's an animal – well let's read the context – let's make sure that this is right.

In a similar example, Barbara drew her students' attention to an unfamiliar use of the word stew, pointing out the dissonance between the familiar definition and the context to help the students see the contrast.

Barbara: (reading text) **Now stop asking questions. Be quiet. Stop stewing. Your father knows what he is doing.**
So Papa has asked Small Bear to stop stewing. Is he talking about making stew?

Students: No!

Barbara: What does he want him to do? Stop stewing. What does he want him to do?

Sensitivity to students' confusions. While reading, the teachers responded to indications the children did not understand such as puzzled looks or questions. As Patricia stated, "You can see it in their faces when they don't understand." Perceived confusions impacted not only word selection, but depth

of instruction as well. Cindy explained, “But pretty much if I get a little puzzled look from them, I’ll go a little bit further with the word.”

Students in all classes were encouraged to ask questions about word meanings. This was evident in all classrooms and acknowledged by the teachers as a means of selecting words for instruction. Debby pointed out these questions may not occur during the reading itself but may arise on subsequent days after the child has had time to ponder what he heard.

Teachers often use favorite books year after year and use those experiences to guide word selection. Additionally, the two veteran teachers (Debby and Barbara) relied on their prior experiences as both teachers and parents to anticipate which words would be unknown. For example, although relatively new to teaching second grade, Debby reported using her knowledge of her grandson’s vocabulary as a guide as she explained, “And if I don’t think he would know that word, I try to stop and say – so you all know what that means?”

Intentionality versus Spontaneity. A somewhat surprising finding of this study was the lack of intentionality and advance planning in the selection of words for instruction. Although all of the teachers stated strong beliefs in the importance of vocabulary and the role of read-alouds in developing word knowledge, the data suggest that pre-selection of words was less common than spontaneous instruction.

Intentionality. All participants showed evidence of advanced selection of words at some point in the study, consistent with recommended practice (Beck et al., 2002; Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009; Graves, 2006). Such evidence might include having target terms written on sentences strips or on the board, indicated in lesson plans, or leading discussions prior to reading the text. Advanced selection of words seemed to occur more frequently when related to the purpose of the read-aloud, subsequent assignments, and instructional routines.

Three of the teachers (Debby, Cindy, and Patricia) had distinct differences in their read-aloud styles between those characterized as instructional and those characterized as aesthetic. For these teachers, the aesthetic read-alouds took place in a group gathering, with children informally seated or laying down on the floor. In contrast, the instructional read-alouds

took place with children seated at their desks and the teacher standing in front of the room.

There was a clear difference in the degree of planning for these two contexts with evidence of advance selection of words occurring more frequently when the read-aloud had an instructional intent. For example, Barbara had target words written on sentence strips or the board and discussed the words prior to reading when the read-aloud had an instructional focus. When the purpose of the read-aloud was aesthetic, she did not engage in either of those strategies. Patricia listed words on the board during an instructional read-aloud and had students choose two to include in their vocabulary notebooks.

Pre-selection of words also occurred when teachers had a follow-up assignment planned that would require their use. The greatest degree of intentionality was noted when words would be needed for a post-reading assignment such as when Debby highlighted vocabulary related to the storm so that the students would use these words in a writing assignment.

Another factor that appeared related to this difference was classroom routine. Cindy had a consistent instructional routine after reading that included a focus on vocabulary words. Children were asked to suggest words to add to a vocabulary list. Cindy added words that she thought were important. No similar routine was incorporated into the aesthetic read-alouds.

Spontaneity. During the course of this study, the teachers seemed more prone to select words during the reading. When they encountered a word that they thought would be unknown or was important to comprehension they simply stopped and addressed it at that time. They relied on their instincts, knowledge of “average” children’s vocabulary and in some cases, their own confusions or questions about word meaning to guide their choices.

While degree of spontaneity is needed to be able to respond appropriately to students, selecting words “on the run” can lead to ineffective instruction and teacher error (Kindle, 2008). Responding “in the moment” to student questions and confusions is important, but the lack of intentionality in word selection can lead to time spent discussing words of little utility, such as the nonsense words quogwinkle, chittering, and squibbling in the reading of *The BFG* (Dahl, 1982).

Additionally, spontaneity can be an inefficient use of instructional time. Incidences of extended, tangential discourse and the conveyance of confusing and at times erroneous information occurred when teachers did not have a clear definition in mind for a target word. For example, while reading *The BFG* aloud, Debby spontaneously selected a nonsense word for instruction from the text. When a student correctly used context clues to infer a definition, Debby did not acknowledge his correct response, but rather stated that she wasn't sure what the word meant, resulting in a confusing instructional sequence. Her lack of familiarity was confirmed as she realized a few paragraphs later that the child's definition made sense and confirmed the word meaning.

Adequate preparation can minimize the likelihood of misleading or erroneous information being conveyed. Reading the books in advance and analyzing the words selected for instruction would likely decrease some types of errors. Teacher miscues while reading aloud are easy to understand as teachers' attention is divided between the text and the students. But miscues can be problematic when the teacher is relying on context clues to convey word meaning and selects target terms spontaneously. While reading *The BFG*, Cindy substituted the word *took* for *shook* - an easily made miscue. Unfortunately, when the listener is trying to infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word, a simple miscue leads to confusion, particularly when the miscue is targeted for instruction. The phrase *took the bottle vigorously* provides a much different context than *shook the bottle vigorously*. When asked for the meaning of the unfamiliar word *vigorously*, students offered synonyms such as *snatch* and *grab*, using context clues as they had been taught. Even the teacher seemed confused by her miscue. She ended the discussion by suggesting that *excitedly* or *quickly* would be acceptable definitions.

Implications and Conclusion

Read-alouds are frequent events in primary classrooms and are an important vehicle for vocabulary development, particularly for children who enter school with smaller receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge. The teachers in this study showed some evidence of selecting words in advance (intentionality), but more typically relied on their experiences with their students and intuition (spontaneity) to guide them in identifying words that might be unfamiliar. To maximize student achievement and to begin to narrow the vocabulary gaps that exist among students, it is necessary to explore ways to

increase the learning potential in every facet of the day. The practices of the four primary teachers in this study provide a lens with which to explore our own practices as we seek to refine and improve our instruction.

Although read-alouds can be enjoyable literacy events with minimal teacher preparation, analysis suggests the instructional power would be greatly enhanced with a more considered approach toward word selection (i.e., Coyne et al., 2004; Justice et al., 2005; Kindle, 2012; Loftus et al., 2010). This is particularly important when read-alouds serve as a primary vehicle for vocabulary instruction and when student needs for vocabulary development are significant. Familiarity with the guidelines for word selection found in the professional literature and pre-selecting words for instruction based on those guidelines would be two simple steps to increasing student learning.

Recommendations for Teachers and Teacher Educators

The practices of the teachers in this study, in conjunction with the literature on word selection, suggest various steps teachers can take to refine their own practices. These concepts can easily be added as additional focal points in reading methods courses to be sure that novice teachers approach read-alouds with intention and purpose. For example, an assignment in a methods course might be to identify words for instruction within a read-aloud text and script how those words might be addressed through the use of labelling, gestures, or synonyms. As in most areas of teaching, when selecting words for instruction, it is a matter of balance.

- Immediate/Long term utility: Teachers should seek to balance words needed for immediate use in a specific context, such as a writing assignment, with words that have utility in the broader curriculum.
- Pre-selection/spontaneous choice: Teachers should respond to student questions and confusions, but this should be balanced with reasoned pre-selection of words.
- Personal experience/research literature: As teachers, we rely heavily on our own experiences and intuition when selecting words, and this can be quite effective. We need to balance that with familiarity with the professional literature to ensure we stay current in our understandings. Classifying words selected by tier or checking selecting words against

one of the published word lists are among the strategies teachers might use to ensure their choices are consistent with research.

Future Research

The descriptions of read-aloud events obtained in this exploratory study raise many questions about teacher practice and the criteria used to select words for instruction during read-alouds. Is passage comprehension the most critical factor, or should future utility be considered more salient? Should one select partially known words, as suggested by Biemiller (2006), or focus on words that can be taught in the time available (Longo & Curtis, 2008)? These questions indicate the need to continue this line of research.

In order to explore actual teacher practices in this study, it was deemed necessary to limit the influence of the researcher as much as possible. While a balanced text set of narrative and informational texts would have enriched the data set, the teachers were given complete freedom to choose texts in order to ensure authentic practice. The resulting dominance of narrative texts in the study is not unusual and the bias for narrative text in primary classrooms is well-documented in the literature (i.e. Duke, 2000). Future studies might strive to achieve representation of multiple genres and informational texts to examine how word selection is influenced by the nature of the text. Specifically, it would be interesting to note whether teachers were more intentional in their selection of words from informational texts, as well as to see how they determined the degree of prior knowledge students brought to the reading.

Additionally, future studies should expand the number of participants and educational settings. For example, the teachers in this school did not use a published curriculum in which both reading selections and vocabulary words are predetermined. It is possible that using such a program for reading instruction would have an effect on the words teachers selected for instruction in their read-alouds. A variety of educational settings would also facilitate an examination of how practice might differ in classrooms serving a large number of English Language Learners or students from under-resourced neighborhoods. Children from these populations typically have greater vocabulary needs (Biemiller, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995). Are teachers more intentional in their selection of words and explicit in their instruction in these contexts? Replicating this study with more teachers in more schools will

provide greater understanding of teacher practice as well as the factors that influence their choices.

More research is needed regarding the guiding principles of word selection. Although there are several published lists of vocabulary words (e.g. Biemiller, 1999; Dale & O'Rourke, 1981; Fry, 2004) that might serve as a guide for teachers, does selecting words from these lists result in greater outcomes than selecting words based on other criteria, such as Beck et al.'s (2002) tiered system? This strand of research would serve word selection in published curricula as well. In an analysis of selected pre-school programs, Neuman and Dwyer (2009) concluded there were no apparent criteria for word selection. It is little wonder that individual teachers would experience confusion when purported experts are not in consensus on best practice.

Finally, research is needed to explore the reasons why the gulf between practice and research continues in education and what might be done to narrow the gap. Easy access to the professional literature via the Internet means that the availability of quality resources is no longer an issue. If research is not impacting practice, we need to consider why that is the case. Are teachers too busy to read professional literature? Are articles written in a way that findings are readily understood? What sources do teachers go to for continued professional development? In this study, the teachers talked about the importance of vocabulary development, but lacked a comprehensive approach to instructional that was based on research, relying instead on conventional wisdom. It is important to determine if there are contextual constraints on teachers, such as the requirement to follow a specific curriculum, that result in teachers ceding the responsibility for vocabulary selection to others.

Conclusion

Research indicates that read-alouds can be effective vehicles for vocabulary development in pre- and beginning readers (e.g., Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Elley, 1989; Justice et al., 2005). Ultimately, the impact of read-alouds on vocabulary depends on decisions made by teachers in terms of word selection and instructional practices. While the teachers in this study talked about the importance of read-alouds to build vocabulary, they did not have a clearly articulated set of criteria for word selection, nor did they engage in advanced planning in the same way they planned other lessons. The lack of such planning can lower the quality of instruction, and on occasion result in misleading

instruction as seen in this study. Given that research has shown that vocabulary gaps at school entry increase rather than decrease, educators need to approach vocabulary instruction and word selection with purpose and intent as they do with the other components of reading instruction.

Despite widespread acceptance of the importance of vocabulary instruction in the educational community, many schools, including the site for this study, leave the task of vocabulary development to teacher judgment, publisher recommendations in a basal program, or a purchased curriculum. The problem with these approaches is that there is no long range, unified understanding among those enacting such curricula for developing vocabulary. There is a need for schools and school districts to develop comprehensive programs for vocabulary development and read-alouds should play a significant role in instruction. The need for this type of program is particularly great in schools serving economically disadvantaged children and English language learners.

Studies of teacher behaviors during read-alouds illuminate areas of dissonance between research and practice. This work contributes to the field by identifying criteria that teachers used for word selection during read-alouds and drawing comparisons to best-practice recommendations in the literature. This comparison sheds light on the need for more effective transfer of knowledge from the research community to practitioners, and poses questions that lead to continued work in the field.

Finally, this study serves as a reminder of the importance of teachers to continue to reflect critically on their own practice in all aspects of instruction, including read-alouds to ensure every opportunity is maximized to impact student learning. Teachers in the primary grades do not necessarily have the freedom to select the texts for whole-class instruction and/or read-alouds. The teachers in this study were expected by the principal to include read-alouds daily, and they complied with this mandate. In other schools, teachers may be required to teach from a specific series and to adhere to publishers' suggestions for vocabulary words to teach. Nevertheless, teachers have the ultimate responsibility to use their own judgement in vocabulary instruction as they are best positioned to determine the degree of word knowledge of their students and to create a climate of word consciousness in their classrooms. However

well-intentioned, simply incorporating read-alouds will not be sufficient to grow students' vocabularies without purposeful, intentional planning.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Topic Domain 1: Teaching Experiences

Lead-off question: Tell me about how you came to teach at Westpark School.

Covert categories:

- Prior teaching experience – years and location
- Attitudes toward current school versus previous teaching contexts
- Attitudes/beliefs regarding students, parents, and administration

Possible Follow-up Questions:

- Tell me about some of your other teaching experiences.
- What made you decide to teach at Westpark?
- How do your experiences here compare to your previous experiences?
- What do you like best about teaching at Westpark?

Topic Domain 2: Understanding of Vocabulary Development

Lead-off question: Tell me about how you incorporate vocabulary into your instruction

Covert categories:

- Understanding of vocabulary development and acquisition
- How is vocabulary development incorporated into the language arts curriculum
- Understanding of the role vocabulary plays in reading ability

Possible Follow-up questions:

- How do you see your students' vocabulary developing over the year?
- What are some of the ways that you have developed vocabulary recently with your class?
- What evidence of positive impacts of vocabulary instruction with your students have you seen?

Topic Domain 3: Use of Read-aloud

Lead-off question: Talk me through the process of a typical read-aloud.

Covert categories:

- Text selection
- Uses of read alouds
- Word selection for instruction/focus
- Planning versus spontaneity

Possible follow-up questions:

- What are some of the books you have recently read to your students?
- What do you think about when selecting a book for a read-aloud?
- How do you decide which words to focus on for instruction?
- I noticed that sometimes the words seem to be selected in advance, and other times it seems that they reflect “in the moment” decisions – can you tell me a little about that?

Topic Domain 4: Instructional Strategies

Lead-off question: What are some of the vocabulary development strategies that you use in your classroom?

Covert categories:

- What strategies does the teacher consider to be good instructional strategies?

- Is there consistency between what is stated and actual practice?
- Is the teacher aware of her own strategy use?
- Is strategy use planned or accidental?

Possible follow-up questions

- What are some strategies that you have found to work well with your students?
- What are some of the strategies you have used this week in your teaching?
- How do you determine whether your vocabulary instruction has been effective?

About the Author

Karen J. Kindle is an assistant professor at the University of South Dakota where she teaches courses in reading methods and English Language Learning. Kindle taught for 20 years in Texas public schools as a primary teacher, ESL teacher, and Reading Specialist. Her research interests include vocabulary development in read-alouds and reading teacher education.

