ROBUST VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION IN A READERS' WORKSHOP

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The students had returned from lunch, and the principal of the secondary school was making an unexpected visit to our lively, cozy, third-grade classroom. The students encircled this jovial man, glad for this break in the daily routine. It was an amusing contrast, this large man surrounded by children who barely reached his waist.

One of the children, a quiet girl whose native language is Japanese, had an unusual request: "Will you stay and watch our play?" she asked, and added, "I beseech you!"

On being beseeched, the smile on the administrator's face turned to laughter. He was not expecting this flourish of language. However, it was not merely an accident that my student used the word *beseech*. Students in our classroom often beseech their teachers or other students when they want something from them.

My language arts instruction is based on the model of the readers' workshop (see Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; Miller, 2008). Like many workshop-based classrooms, we spend a lot of time focusing on comprehension strategies. I love to hear my students sharing their inferences and connections as they discuss the books they are reading. However, I was aware that my students, many of whom do not speak English at home, needed more vocabulary development, and our readers' workshop does not employ word lists like a scripted reading series might.

These concerns about my students' vocabulary development led me to the work of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) on robust vocabulary instruction,
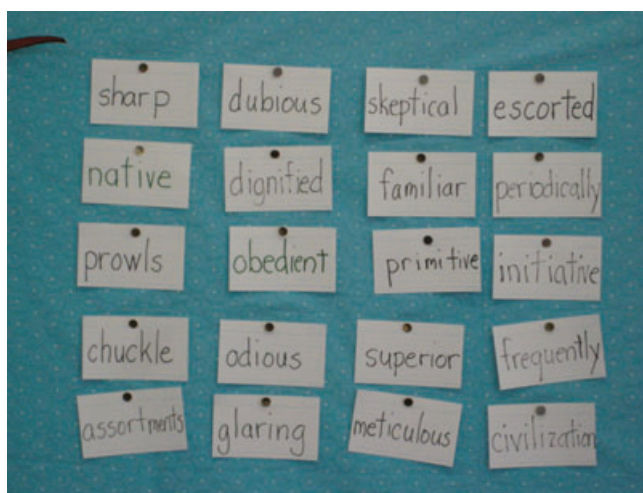
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which "is rich, frequent, and extends beyond the lesson...there is an energy and liveliness to it that pervades the classroom atmosphere" (p. 77). Vocabulary instruction is rich when students are "actively involved in using and thinking about word meanings and creating lots of associations among words" (p. 73). The teacher chooses words from texts that are read in class and uses the words in a variety of activities. Students are encouraged to look for examples of the vocabulary words being used outside the classroom.

I wanted to create an environment of robust vocabulary instruction without sacrificing the freedom and flexibility of my readers' workshop. To accomplish this, I implemented a daily program based on robust vocabulary instruction to complement our workshops.

Word Selection

Student choice is perhaps the single defining feature of workshop teaching. In readers' workshop, students choose the books they will read; in writers' workshop, students choose their writing topics. It makes sense to me

that students should also have choice about the words they want to learn. Allowing students to select words provides a sense of ownership (Why are we learning this? Because you asked for it!) while teaching students to be metacognitive.

Students place words that interest them or that they wish to understand better inside a shoebox labeled "Word Box." Generally, students find these words while reading independently or with a partner during readers' workshop, but students also submit words from home or from other reading during the school day.

When submitting words, I ask students to use a sticky note or a small piece of paper to write their names, the word, and the sentence from the text where the word was found. For example, a student submission for the word *contagious* has the word and the sentence "My giggling is contagious." The student's name is written on the back.

Students are encouraged, not required, to add words to the word box. When I notice that a student is not adding any words, this is something to explore when I'm conferring with that student during workshop time.

It raises questions: Why isn't this student contributing words? Has the student chosen books that are too easy, lacking challenging vocabulary? Is the student thinking metacognitively? How can I help or encourage this child?

Although the word box allows for student choice, it also allows me to retain some control as the teacher. At the end of the week, I select at least five words to teach the following week.

Words that are not selected for use with the entire class can provide insight into a child's needs and level of vocabulary development and can be used during conferences with individual students. Conferences also provide an opportunity to encourage students who are not contributing words to the word box on a regular basis.

I select the words to be taught based on my evaluation of their usefulness. Is this a word that a child is likely to encounter regularly? I try to avoid words that are too obscure. Beck et al. (2002) use three tiers to

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Pause and Ponder

- How do you teach vocabulary in your classroom? Do you believe that vocabulary should be explicitly taught or acquired incidentally through extensive reading?

- How do you provide opportunities for student choice in your classroom?

- Have you learned a second language? How did you learn new vocabulary? Do your experiences hold any lessons that can be applied in your classroom?

Table   Examples of Students' Word Submissions

Words Submitted by Students	Basic Words (Tier One)	Complex, Frequently Encountered Words (Tier Two)	Complex, Less Frequently Encountered Words (Tier Three)
anonymous confidential contagious doctrine extravagance fighting limestone orchard refused spiral	fighting	anonymous confidential contagious extravagance orchard refused spiral	doctrine limestone

categorize words: basic words (tier one), more complex words that occur frequently (tier two), and complex words that are encountered less frequently (tier three) because they tend to apply to specialized situations. They suggest looking for words that "offer more precise or mature ways of referring to ideas they already know about" (p. 16).

The Table provides an example of 10 words submitted by students. The word *fighting*, from tier one, is obviously an important word, but perhaps best suited for individual instruction, as most students already know and use it. The seven words in tier two are the best words for whole-class instruction, because they are complex, yet relatively common, and because most are more sophisticated ways of expressing ideas the students have already encountered.

Finally, I write the words on index cards. I write a definition, sometimes using a dictionary, but being very careful to define the words in terms the students will understand. I keep the children's notes from the word box with the index cards on the chalk tray, ready for Monday morning.

Monday

On Monday, we learn the words and the definitions. I read the words and sentences that I have chosen from the word box. I read the child's name to give them recognition—"Here's an interesting word that Anna found this week." To give all students a chance to hear the word context, I read the sentence before sharing the definition. We talk about our inferences about the word's meaning based on the sentence. We discuss our prior knowledge: Do we have any schema that might help us to define this word? Finally, I share the definition.

If the word calls for it, I might share a picture of the word as well. For example, showing a picture is an effective way to demonstrate the word *snout*. However, the pictures are less useful for explaining more abstract words.

The process of introducing the words takes about 10 to 15 minutes. Later in the day, I tack the words up on our word wall. (In our classroom, we use the word wall for vocabulary instruction, not spelling.)

Tuesday

On Tuesday, we write sentences for the words. This is a shared writing experience, with students seated around an easel, not a solitary, "write a sentence for each word" activity. We review the definitions. As Beck et al. (2002) pointed out, when children are given an open-ended assignment to write sentences in traditional vocabulary lessons, they often create meaningless sentences or sentences that do not require an understanding of the word (e.g., "I saw a snout."). The authors suggested starting with a prompt and asking students to finish the sentence. We use a think-pair-share strategy: Students think about the prompt, discuss with their partners, and share their responses with the class.

Finally, we combine students' suggestions into a response that is recorded on chart paper. In the cocreation of these sentences, I attempt to balance students' ownership of their ideas with the need for sentences that

give a strong contextual sense of each word. For example, the sentence "He is contagious" is less context rich than the sentence "He washed his hands to avoid getting a contagious disease." These sentences become a reference for the students.

Wednesday–Thursday

Unlike the activities on Monday and Tuesday, which are set, the activities on Wednesday and Thursday vary from week to week. Also, all the words on the word wall are used for these activities, which means that words introduced during the previous weeks are interspersed with the new words to allow students to review older words. The purpose of these activities is to reinforce the meanings and allow students to share their understanding. These are some of the activities:

- Students choose a word from the word wall to illustrate. Their classmates must identify the word from the illustration.

- Tic-tac-toe is an activity adapted from Ginnis (2002). Students draw a 3 × 3 grid on a scrap of paper. Each student chooses nine words from the word wall and write each in a square. The definitions are written on scraps of paper. Students draw an *X* through a word when its definition is read.

- Students choose between two words with similar meanings (Beck et al., 2002). To get my students moving, we stand up to do this. For example, to explore the difference between *resemblance* and *mimic*, I might read the sentence: "The parrot _____ his owner's voice." Students would move to one side of the room to choose *mimic*, the other side for *resemblance*, or stay in the middle of the room if they weren't certain.

Friday

On Friday, one student gets to be in the spotlight. However, the student in the spotlight is not truly the one being assessed. Rather, the class understanding of the words is being assessed. I prepare 10 questions that I read aloud for one student to respond to orally. The answers to the questions are words from the word wall, including some words previously introduced. The students in the class raise green, red, or yellow cards based on whether they agree, disagree,

or are unsure (Ginnis, 2002). This provides me with a clear picture of the class understanding. We always review the answers at the end to clear up any misunderstandings.

After considering the responses to Friday's activities, I remove words from the word wall. (I keep these words in my desk, however, to be reviewed periodically.) I also remove words that have become part of the classroom vernacular—when students beseech their parents for permission to go to a friend's house, I know that *beseech* is ready to come down. I also peruse the words in the word box and select the new words for the following week.
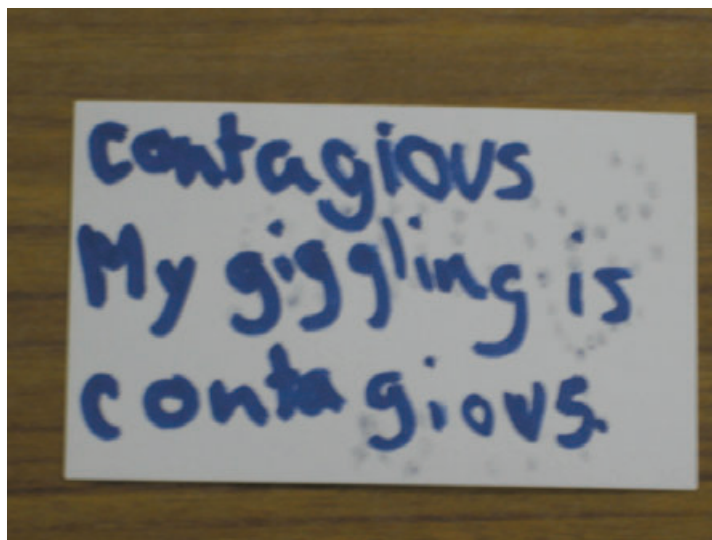
Authentic Vocabulary Instruction

Some teachers take a different approach regarding vocabulary instruction. Orehovec and Alley (2003) stated (quite explicitly) that in a student-centered, workshop-style classroom "vocabulary is learned incidentally through reading material"

TAKE ACTION!

Four steps for getting started:

1. Ask for a volunteer to bring a shoebox from home to share with the class. Make this shoebox your class word box.

2. Encourage your students to look for interesting words to submit to the word box.

3. Create a class vocabulary word wall using words from the word box. Encourage your students to use the words in writing and in conversation.

4. Build your repertoire of vocabulary activities, such as those in this article, to use to reinforce the vocabulary words.

(p. 16). In my view, workshop is meant to be an environment for authentic reading and writing. Is focused vocabulary instruction inherently inauthentic?

One writer's description of his writing process influenced my thinking about this question. Rhodes (1995) described the meticulous attention with which he attends to each word: "Looking up words is a vital step in research. A word choice isn't apt merely because a word's formal definition seems to fit. Words are layered with meaning, and the layers need to fit as well" (p. 76). To find the best word, "I frequently look up ten or fifteen different related words before I find one that clicks into place and locks down my meaning" (p. 78). For writers like Rhodes, understanding and appreciating words is anything but a subconscious, incidental process.

The ample results in my classroom have satisfied my concerns about authenticity. Students regularly recognize the words in the books they are reading, and they frequently apply the words in their writing. When an assembly being held in the library directly above our clasroom was unusually noisy, a student asked, "What's all that *racket*? Are they driving motorcycles up there?"

In another instance, a student applied her knowledge of the word *hinge* to help her understand hinge joints (like elbows) while researching the human body. Parents, too, have commented on how happy they are with their children's growing vocabulary, and some students have even stumped their parents with our word wall words. All this is evidence of authentic learning that extends beyond the lesson and even the classroom. The frequent, rich vocabulary instruction helps my students to notice words, understand the meanings of words, and apply words in their reading and writing.

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Ginnis, P. (2002). *The teacher's toolkit*. Bethel, CT: Crown House.
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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan
- "Rooting Out Meaning: Morpheme Match-Ups in the Primary Grades" by Helen Hoffner

IRA Books
- *The Vocabulary Book* by Michael F. Graves
- *What Research Has to Say About Vocabulary Instruction* edited by Alan E. Farstrup and S. Jay Samuels

IRA Journal Article
- "The Latin–Greek Connection: Building Vocabulary Through Morphological Study" by Timothy V. Rasinski, Nancy Padak, Joanna Newton, and Evangeline Newton, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2011