Make it Active, Make it Fun: Vocabulary Strategies for Everyone!

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What is meant by meaningful vocabulary instruction? Over the past 40 years, researchers have looked at the amount and type of vocabulary instruction that has occurred in classrooms across the country. Through her observation of elementary classrooms, Durkin (1978-79) found that of 4,469 minutes of reading instruction approximately 3% (2.62) of the total instructional minutes were devoted to vocabulary instruction. Later (1982) Juel found that on average only 1.67 minutes a day were devoted to direct vocabulary instruction among 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teachers. And in a following study (2003) Juel et al., found that when vocabulary is taught it is often taught out of context and with a focus on decoding as opposed to meaning. The bottom line is that for the small amount of time that vocabulary is being taught—it isn’t in meaningful ways.

What is the primary method of vocabulary instruction in a typical classroom? Ask a room of students, “How are you being taught vocabulary?” Most likely you will hear “we look up definitions!” While the dictionary or glossary can be a valuable resource when teaching students how to find the meaning of unknown words, educators should be aware of their limitations as a resource for vocabulary study.

First and foremost, the dictionary is written with one primary rule in mind——be concise! Imagine trying to cover all of the words in the English language in one text. This limitation leads to definitions that aren’t rich in context or meaning. For example, take the word, “systemic.” I quickly looked that
word up using dictionary.com. The first definition is: *of or pertaining to a system*. I think I could have come to that conclusion just using structural analysis! The second definition is: *pertaining to or affecting the body as a whole*. To someone who didn’t know that word to start with, how much clearer would it be based on the above definitions?

How children use the dictionary to make meaning of words was demonstrated in a study conducted by Miller and Gildea (1985). In studying several thousand sentences constructed by fifth and sixth grade students they found that students did the best they could with the definitions that were provided. For example; for the word “correlate” one student wrote, “Me and my parents correlate, because without them I wouldn’t be here.” Now we may laugh, but if you follow their logic, this sentence makes complete sense. The definition they were working with was, “Correlate. 1. be related one to the other: 2. put into relation...” So, if the dictionary isn’t the best source of primary instruction, what should teachers do?

One idea is for teachers to create student friendly definitions. The key to this is planning in advance and writing the definition before you try it out with students. It is actually harder to create student friendly definitions than you may think! Try it for the word, systemic. I have done this with a room full of Master degree students and they find it much more challenging than they anticipated! These more student friendly definitions can be used when providing students direct instruction on vocabulary.

In addition to direct instruction of unknown words, teachers will want to teach students to rely more on strategies than dictionary definitions. Children need to know how to attack words when they are reading independently. The first strategy children need is how to use context clues. Consider how you can make sense of the following stanza from *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll (2004):

> ’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
> All mimsy were the borogoves,  
> And the mome raths outgrabe. (p. 165)

Now answer the following questions, “What time of day did this take place?” “How would you describe a slithy tove?” “What were the slithy toves doing” “What do you think is meant by the word, ‘mimsy’?” While you may not have a clue what those words mean, you were probably able to answer all of those questions. Why? Thanks to context clues!

Using context clues means that I use the surrounding words and sentences to determine the meaning of the unknown word. Two primary types of context clues are syntactic and semantic. A syntactic context clue is one that uses the part of speech to help me determine the meaning. For instance, if we go back to the word used above, “correlate” we can practice using our syntactic clues to find the meaning. “The accountant is trying to correlate this year’s figures with last...”
Alumni and Faculty Honored

Dr. Rosario Ordonez-Jasis along with four Reading alumni were honored on April 11 at the Honor an Educator event hosted by Dean Claire Cavallaro and the College of Education.

Dr. Ordonez-Jasis also accepted, along with Roberta Gonzalez, the Titan Excellence Partnership Award for the “School Readiness Early Learning Program.” This outstanding community program, began in 2004, and benefitted 500 school children in the El Rancho Unified School district. The program, designed to strengthen home-school ties has enriched the lives of families in the city of Pico Rivera. Dr. Ordonez-Jasis has been a driving force for this excellent program.

Robin Barry and Lesley Zorola were honored for their work in establishing the Learning Academy at Edison Elementary School in Anaheim. Lesley and Robin run an outstanding during and after school program that is making a significant difference for the children and families in their school community.

Jane Hopper was honored for her lifetime of dedication in assisting college students as they developed critical thinking habits, study skills, and academic vocabularies. Jane, now retired, taught at both CSUF and UCI. She co-authored the text, Language of Learning, with JoAnn Carter-Wells, that has been used by college students across the country.

In this sentence we know that correlate is being used as a verb- so we know that the accountant is trying to do something. If this didn’t bring the word to life, we can try the next type of context clue, semantic. A semantic context clue allows us to use the meaning of the surrounding words and sentences to determine the meaning of the unknown word. In the sentence above, we know that the accountant is trying to do something to this year’s and last year’s figures.

If we still don’t have a complete understanding of the word, “correlate” we can turn next to the strategy of word structure. Word structure is a strategy where we use our knowledge of the parts of the word (roots, bases, prefixes, and suffixes) to help us determine the unknown word. Continuing our use of the word, “correlate” we can take it apart; cor-relate. We see that at its base is the word “relate” (In addition, I may know that the prefix cor- means “with” or “together”). So, when we put all of these strategies together, we now know that correlate is being used as a verb, it has something to do with this year’s and last year’s figures, and the word “relate” is the base of the meaning of the word. All of this should help me figure out that the account is trying to make this year’s and last year’s figures relate to one another.

So, now you may be thinking- there are a lot of words in the English language that my students may not know. How do I decide which ones to focus on? Which ones should I provide student-friendly definitions for and which ones should I select for students to practice their strategies? Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown and Linda Kucan (2002), in their text, Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction, share the strategy of Tier Words. They state that an ideal reader’s vocabulary contains three levels (tiers) of words;

1) Tier 1 words are words that are frequently occurring and common words. We gained these through exposure in oral language. These words should not need to be the focus of our instruction; except in the case of English language learners (butterfly, march, family…)

2) Tier 2 words occur frequently in the ideal reader’s vocabulary and across many content areas. These are the words we should focus our strategy instruction on (between, among, combine)

3) Tier 3 words are infrequent words that are often content driven (Ptolemy, viscosity, temperance…). It is best to select these words to share with students using student-friendly definitions.

Finally, we have selected our words, taught them either directly through student-friendly definitions or provided students with the opportunity to determine the meaning of the words using their strategies (we check their understanding of the meaning, of course). Now, this is the key to meaningful vocabulary instruction- we must provide students with opportunities to practice their new words! Unknown words should not only be the focus of Monday instruction or mentioned when we encounter the word in the weekly reading passage.
or worse yet- just tested on Friday! Students need time during the week to play with the words. They should participate in a “game” of semantic sleuth or parade-pause-pair so that they can internalize the meaning of the word.

Over the years there has been an increased awareness that students need direct instruction in vocabulary. In addition, this instruction needs to be meaningful and hopefully- fun. Our goal for effective vocabulary instruction should encompass the four main principles that Nagy and Scott (2000) share;

1) students should be active in developing their understanding of words and ways to learn them.
2) students should personalize word meanings
3) students should be immersed in words
4) students should build on multiple sources of information to learn words through repeated exposures.

Through the creation of student-friendly definitions, the teaching of strategies for determining the meaning of unknown words, careful selection of words, and providing students with time to play with words- we can turn vocabulary instruction into meaning making!

(A reference list for works cited above is available from Erica Bowers at ebowers@fullerton.edu)

For those of you itching to know the answers to the Lewis Carroll stanza, here are some fun facts from one of his private periodicals, Mismatch, written in 1855:

Bryllyg: (derived from the verb to bryl or brail). “The time of broiling dinner, i.e., the close of the afternoon.”

Slythy: (compound of slimy and lithie). “Smooth and active.”

Tove: A species of badger. They had smooth white hair, long hind legs, and short horns like a stag. Lived chiefly on cheese.

Gyme: Verb (derived from gyaour or giaour). “a dog.”

Gimblet: (whence gimblet). “To screw out holes in anything.”

Mimsy: (whence miserable or miserable). “Unhappy.”

(excerpted from, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass, Carroll, 2004, pp. 281-282)

Fun Vocabulary Games

Vocabulary games are an engaging way to reinforce definitions, involve students in word learning and create interest in words. Below are several game options for classroom use. The first is explained. Directions for the remaining games are available by contacting Erica Bowers at ebowers@fullerton.edu

Ruth May Siegrist – Outstanding Alumna 2010

Ruth May Siegrist was presented with the Outstanding Alumna award for the Reading Department at REG breakfast meeting in March. After earning her MS in Education, Reading, Ruth continued her education at Claremont Graduate College. Upon completion of her PhD Ruth joined the faculty at CSUF. Her significant contributions during her tenure included receiving grants to train teachers of ESL and literacy to work in Adult Basic Education. She also developed curriculum and established programs for special admit students under the Educational Opportunity Program. She administered campus-wide programs in Educational Equity to help underrepresented students to be successful in college and to raise their graduation rates.

Ruth, author of Yes, Johnny Can Read: Matching Young Readers with Books, has worked tirelessly as executor of her father’s literary works. Lorenz Graham was a pioneer in the field of multicultural literacy. She revived his classic book, How God Fix Jonah, a collection of Bible stories told in the lyrical West African idiom, originally published in 1946 with a foreword by W. E. B. Du Bois.

In 2009, as a retiree, but certainly not retired Ruth went on two mission trips to Liberia, West Africa. In January she led a small team of teachers from California to conduct teacher training seminars for Liberian teachers in three different counties. There is a critical shortage of qualified teachers in that country resulting from 14 years of civil war. On her second trip in September, under the auspices of God’s Kids, she visited orphanages and assessed the educational level of approximately 200 children with a view of infusing money for teacher training at the orphanage schools. For Ruth, taking her training as an educator to help in the country where her parents taught 80 years earlier was like coming full circle. The Liberian people embraced her and called her a “daughter of Liberia” which she considered an honor.

Ruth’s accomplishments during her official working career were impressive, but it is her continual commitment to helping others develop literacy skills as a retiree and on an international stage that so impressed the REG board and Reading faculty. They unanimously recommended that she be this year’s Outstanding Alumna Award recipient.

AM I CURRENT WITH MY REG DUES?

REG members who are current with their dues receive full membership benefits, including newsletters, directories, and notices of networking and social events with alumni and faculty. Dues also help provide scholarships for clinic students and graduate students in the Reading Program. If there is a renewal form included with your newsletter please send it in today.

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Parade-Pause-Pair Vocabulary - Students make cards with either just the vocabulary word or just the definition. Students choose one of their cards to mix. Students get up and mingle (parade) until teacher says “Pause”. They partner with the closest person (Pair) and share their card. The partners determine either the word that matches the definition or the definition to match the word. After 2 “parades” students switch cards with their partner and play again. (This is fun to do to music!)

The Semantic Sleuth Response Boards
The Semantic Sleuth 4-Corners
Multiple Meaning Carousel  The Semantic Sleuth Squad
Rise and Fall Definitions  Vocabulary Memory Boxes

Ann Coil Receives Vision and Visionary Award

(as reported in Inside, a CSUF online publication)

**Ann L. Coil** (M.S. Education, Reading ’75), founder and career consultant, Coil & Associates — received the Distinguished Alumni Award from CSUF at a gala on April 24.

For more than 30 years, Coil has served to help others — as a flight attendant, as a part-time lecturer in reading at her alma mater and, since 1980, as head of a career consulting firm. Coil, who holds a doctorate from Claremont Graduate University, has created a series of career and employee development materials, and authored or co-authored three books: “Performance Reviews: Empowered Careers,” “The Career Portfolio” and “The Career Portfolio College Edition.” In 1994, she was honored with the Boy Scouts of America, Orange County Council’s Learning for Life Women of Excellence Award for Business.

“My experiences at CSUF were truly life-changing for me,” said Coil, a resident of Santa Ana. “I had never found my niche in the workplace and was so eager to find work I loved. At Cal State Fullerton, I received a first-rate education as a reading specialist and was trained and mentored by a fine faculty and inspired by talented colleagues. As a career consultant, I help people decide what they want to be when they grow up, in other words, find work they love!” Coil explained. “God has blessed me with a great life.”

REG Grants Available in the Fall!

What’s on your classroom “wish list”? As school funds become more precious, it is good to know REG offers its members a way to fill some of the gaps for the things that can help to round out your reading programs. Applications for grants with budgets up to $300 are available to REG members in the fall. Go to the Reading Educator’s Guild website at www.readingeducatorsguild.org to download the application.
Naming the Reading Center after Hazel Miller Croy

What’s Next?

Update by Dr. Debbie Hancock

Thank you, REG members who attended the Winter Brunch and contributed to the Hazel Miller Croy Endowment Fund! Your generosity helped jump start our fundraising efforts. Steering Committee members and Dr. Croy’s family have joined you in bringing us nearly half-way to our initial goal of $25,000. Thanks for agreeing with us that it’s time to honor Dr. Croy by telling her story and naming the Reading Center after her. Much needed scholarships, Reading Center equipment, and faculty research and development will be supported by interest earnings from the Hazel Miller Croy Endowment Fund.

Our next activity is a special event at the CSUF Reading Center (EC 24) on Saturday, June 19, 2010, from 10:30 a.m. to 12 noon. Having it on Saturday should make for an easy drive and parking will be free (and plentiful!). There’ll be time for refreshments and for you to reconnect with colleagues, friends and faculty. We’ll share with you some stories about Dr. Croy, what’s happening in the Reading program today and what the future holds. There will be an opportunity for you to become a Legacy Partner by giving or pledging money on that day, but if that isn’t possible, we don’t want you to miss this event. Please think about friends and colleagues and invite them as well.

RSVP to Bobbee Cline, the College of Education’s Director of Development, at (657) 278-7567 or bcline@fullerton.edu and she will give you details and answer any questions you have.

Welcome to the New Members of the REG Board!

The REG Board for 2010-2012 was confirmed at our Spring Breakfast Event held on March 27.

Many of the board members have returned for another term of service, including: Robin Barry, president; Lesley Zorola, vice-president programs; Jan Bagwell, vice-president membership/treasurer; Chris Parmenter, secretary; Linda Cardwell, hospitality; Gena Lovett, newsletter editor; and, Kathi Bartle-Angus, faculty liaison.

We are thrilled to welcome Kimberly Mundala as REG web page coordinator and Linda Vander Wende as historian as the newest members to the board. Both are recent graduates of the Reading Program and bring a wealth of knowledge and talents to REG through their roles as educators in K-12 and post-secondary programs. Welcome, Kim and Linda!