

Vocabulary: The Key to the Kingdom!

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“Vocabulary is the key to the kingdom of reading and writing,” is a statement I frequently make as I bring professional development to various districts across the state of New Jersey. I’m a literacy coach for the Rutgers Center for Literacy Development, and I passionately agree with that sentiment. If you think about it, how much listening, speaking, reading and writing can any of us do without a solid and ever-expanding vocabulary? The explicit teaching of vocabulary is often overlooked in the elementary classroom, in spite of the fact that knowledge of vocabulary is a strong predictor of reading comprehension (Baker, Simmons & Kame’enuie, 1998; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986) and that instituting a vocabulary program has a large effect on student achievement (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2018). Even after teachers concede that explicit instruction in vocabulary is necessary, there are often questions about which words are important to teach and how to instruct within such a program.

Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown’s wonderful book, *Bringing Words to Life*, (2002) explains that words can be categorized in three tiers. Tier one words are those already known by the learners as they enter our classrooms. Tier three words are those which are found mostly in content-area work (parallelogram, isthmus, photosynthesis). The sweet spot for vocabulary study is in words categorized as tier two words. These words can frequently be found in beautifully written children’s books (melancholy, saunter, predator). As we conduct read-alouds with children, we, and the students themselves should be on the lookout for these exquisite words. They fall into the lexicon we would most like to hear in our classroom discussions or see in our pupils’ written work. They are also, happily, words which children often find fascinating. If students are old enough to locate words within the pages of their own independent reading, these should also be considered as we choose vocabulary to study.

The soundest advice I have ever received about how to study words was from Robert Marzano. He created a six-step instructional method that is a good starting place for any teacher who has the desire to focus on vocabulary. Those six steps are:

1. Teacher provides an explanation or student-friendly definition for students.
2. Students restate the explanation in their own words.
3. Students each sketch a symbolic representation (non-linguistic) of the word’s meaning.
4. Students write the explanation and the pictorial representation in their vocabulary notebooks and teachers engage children in activities requiring them to use their new words.
5. Students discuss the words and their meanings with partners/groups, refining their understanding.
6. Teachers involve students in games, allowing them to play with words and reinforce their word knowledge.

The schools with which I have worked that have done the most effort with vocabulary often do even more than this. Teachers and students use Frayer models (modified to fit each grade level) to note the word’s meaning, a personal picture of the word, its synonym and antonym, and a sentence utilizing the word. In fact, in several schools, there is a bulletin board-sized Frayer model in the hall near the

principal's office for the "word of the week," which is announced, along with the word's definition, each Monday by the principal. On Tuesday through Friday, classes submit sentences using the new word, and the principal announces the winning sentences daily. Other schools have gone so far as to hold vocabulary parades for the entire school. Near the end of each year, classes look over their lists of words and each child (and teacher!) chooses to depict the meaning of one word in the parade. It's like Halloween in May, without the blood and gore. Once you have 'become' a word, you are highly unlikely to forget its meaning!

Works Cited

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SCOLD

To **scold** means to talk to someone angrily because you think they did something wrong.



In *Honey, Honey, Lion...*

Honey Guide **scolded** Honey Badger because he ate all the honey

"Vocabulary Wall Word Card with a student friendly definition and an example drawn from *Honey Honey Lion* by Jan Brett"