



What if they can say the words but don't know what they mean?

Pat Cunningham

Recently, in a children's magazine I read an article about King Tut titled "The King of Bling" (*Weekly Reader*, September 1, 2005). When I finished it, I looked again at the title. What did it mean to be the king of bling? I skimmed the article again and found no explanation. Annoyed, I checked my dictionary. Just as I thought—no such word as *bling*. As I was e-mailing the editor, complaining about using a word that children wouldn't understand without an explanation, one of my undergraduates appeared. I then sat mortified as my student explained the word to me. "Everyone knows what *bling* means. It's things that are gold and glittery, as in 'bling, bling!'"

I tell this story not to illustrate how "un with it" I am but to show that being able to say a word doesn't matter if you don't know what it means. Vocabulary is critical to reading comprehension. Children differ greatly in the size of their meaning vocabularies at school entrance, and those with small vocabularies tend to add fewer words than those with larger vocabularies. The following are some ways to add more meaning-vocabulary development to your classroom instruction.

Provide as much real experience as possible

The words we know best and remember are those with which we have had real, direct experiences. To build vocabulary, begin with real things.

Bring real things into the classroom

Do you have items in your house with names your students might not know, even if they have the

same objects in their houses? Bring in a few objects each week and have children talk about them. In addition to naming the objects, use lots of descriptive words for them and verbs to talk about what you do with them. Teach children a simple version of the game 20 Questions in which you think of an object and they see how many questions they have to ask you to figure out what it is.

Mine your school environment for real things

Look around your school and think about which objects your students might not be able to name. They probably know the words *door* and *window*, but do they know that what goes around them is the *frame*? Can they tell you that the door opens and closes on *hinges* and that you open and close the door by turning the *knob*? Is your playground covered with *asphalt*? Is there any *gravel*, *grass*, or *sand*? What kind of *equipment* do you have in your *gymnasium*, and what can you do with it?

Have students look for real things at home

Pose questions that will send students looking for similar objects near home: "Do you have tools (or kitchen implements, vases, picture frames) in your house? What do they look like? What do you use them for? Is there gravel (or asphalt, grass, sand) anywhere in your neighborhood?"

Seize upon unexpected events as opportunities

The misfortune suffered by a boy who arrives at school with his leg in a cast and walks on crutches

is an opportunity for vocabulary development. Encourage children to ask questions and share their own experiences with broken bones. Take a photo of the child with the broken leg and write a few sentences summarizing his experience.

Take advantage of media and technology

Many children have a concept for the word *mountain* even if they have never seen a real mountain. Most children who have never been to a zoo or circus can recognize zebras and monkeys. When children have concepts for things they have never directly experienced, they have usually seen them in videos or pictures. The Internet makes providing visual images and simulated experiences a daily possibility in every classroom. You and your students can take virtual field trips all over the world and backward in time. You can follow the progress of the latest space probe, find images of all the major deserts of the world, and see and hear British Prime Minister Winston Churchill as he rallied the people of London during the Second World War.

Simulate real experiences with dramatization

Skits are powerful ways to help students build word meanings. To prepare your students to do vocabulary skits, select six words and write them on index cards. Choose a few students to work with you to model for the class how to plan a skit. Talk with your group as the rest of the class listen in. Plan a scene in which you use one word several times. Act out your skit using the target word as many times as possible. Have one member of your group hold up the word every time it occurs.

Imagine, for example, that your group is acting out the word *curious*. You decide that the skit will involve a dad and his 2-year-old son walking to the post office. Father and son meet several people on their walk, and each time the boy stops, points to the stranger, and asks questions: “What’s your name? Where are you going? What are you doing? What’s in the bag? Why are you wearing that funny hat?” The dad smiles each time and explains that his son is *curious* about everything. The strangers walk away remarking, “He’s the most *curious* kid I ever saw.”

Perform the skit. Then, have the students in it ask the audience how the skit showed that the little

boy was curious. Finally, ask the audience to share stories about a curious person. After modeling how to plan and perform a skit, put the children into groups and have them plan skits for other adjectives. Follow the same procedures as your class acts out scenes for the words *nervous*, *frantic*, *impatient*, *jubilant*, and *serene*.

Increase meaning vocabularies through reading

Many words occur more frequently in written text than in spoken language. As children listen to the teacher read, and as they read, they have many opportunities to add words to their vocabulary. Here are some ways to help all children increase their meaning vocabulary through reading.

Teacher read-aloud

Teacher read-aloud is a major opportunity for children to learn new word meanings. Several studies have demonstrated that focused read-alouds foster vocabulary growth (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003). To increase meaning vocabulary, teachers need to go beyond just reading aloud to children. Before you read something aloud, select a few words that many children may not understand. After the book has been read aloud and discussed, return to those words and focus student attention on them. Teach children to use pictures and context to figure out meanings for the words and then guide them to connect these words to their own experience by asking questions such as “When have you felt...? Have you ever experienced a...?” To keep children’s attention on these words, display them along with the cover of the book. Encourage children to be on the lookout for these words and to keep a tally of the number of times they hear or read them.

Picture walks

Get in the habit of taking your students on a picture walk before you read to them or before they read to themselves, and you will find lots of opportunities to build meanings for words. When you picture walk a text, do not stop on every page or take a long time to develop meaning. Children will

read or listen to the text soon, and they will build more meaning for words as they do so. Your purpose before reading is only to alert them to the words and get them in the habit of “mining” the pictures for information.

Sticky-Note Day

If you are focusing on words from your teacher read-alouds and taking your students on picture walks before reading, you are already doing a lot to help students prepare for the discovery of new words in their reading. To help them use what they know about learning word meanings from their reading, designate one day each week as a Sticky-Note Day. At the beginning of reading time, give each student one sticky note. Ask them all to be on the lookout for one new word that they figured out based on the context and the pictures found in their reading. Ask the students to write that word on a sticky note and place it on the sentence in which they first see the word. When the time for reading is over, let volunteers tell their word and read the context that helped them discover its meaning.

Teach morphemes, context, and the dictionary

In addition to learning words for real things and developing vocabulary through reading, your students need to learn to use morphemes, context, and the dictionary to help them refine the meanings of words.

Morphemes

The four prefixes *un*, *re*, *in*, and *dis* are very common and will help students figure out the meaning of over 1,500 words. When teaching morphemes to help students build meanings for words, it is probably best to begin with these four prefixes because students will encounter so many words with them. Once students are comfortable with these four, you can teach some of the less common prefixes.

Elementary students can also learn to notice root words and think about how words with the same root are related. Again, start with the most common words. The word *play* occurs in such related words as *replay*, *playground*, and *playoffs*. *Work* is part of many words, including *workers*,

workout, and *workstation*. *Place* is another common base word, and students often know the meaning of *placemats*, *replace*, and *workplace*. Start a chart listing common words and ask students to be on the lookout for other words that contain them in order to help them become attuned to root words in their reading.

Context

By focusing on words from your teacher read-aloud, taking your students on regular picture walks, and having students share how they figured out the meaning of a sticky-note word in their own reading one day each week, you are teaching students to use context to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words.

The dictionary

Copying and memorizing definitions do not increase students' vocabulary or love of words. Model for your students how people really use dictionaries. When you encounter a word and its meaning is unclear, ask one student to consult the dictionary. This student then models the way adults actually use the dictionary. If you have a dictionary on your classroom computer, model how useful it is by asking a child to “see what our computer dictionary has to say about this word.”

Vocabulary matters

Teachers who are enthusiastic about words project that enthusiasm by conveying their eagerness to learn unfamiliar words and by sharing fascinating words they encounter outside the classroom. Young children are usually enthusiastic about new words, repeating them over and over, enjoying the sound of language, and marveling at the meanings they express. Encourage the continuation of this natural enthusiasm. Open your class to the wonder of words, to spontaneous questions about unfamiliar words, and to judgments about the sounds and values of words.

All the ideas described in this column can be used not only during language arts time but also during science and social studies. You do not need to develop a whole new set of activities for teaching content area vocabulary. All you have to do is

remember to use them even when your schedule says science or social studies. Biemiller and Slonim (2001) cited evidence that lack of vocabulary is a key component of school failure for disadvantaged students. More and more students in U.S. schools are English-language learners, and, for many of them, a limited English vocabulary is a major factor impeding their literacy development. As we work to close the achievement gap, we must remember that vocabulary matters.

Cunningham teaches at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

References

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The department editor welcomes reader comments. E-mail cunninpm@wfu.edu or write to Pat Cunningham, Wake Forest University, Box 7266, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, USA.