

Title: “Making Words Stick”

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Synopsis: “Teachers can make vocabulary meaningful and memorable for younger students by anchoring new words in multiple contexts.” (p. 30) That’s the gist of this article, which argues that vocabulary instruction should include analyzing word meanings, relating words to background knowledge, *and* calling students’ attention to the letters and sounds in words.

The article begins by relating an experience during a phonics class in an urban first-grade classroom. The children were learning to read and spell *hog* when the teacher realized that they didn’t know what a hog was. Some thought she was talking about hawks, others thought the word was *log*. “Such confusions between similar-sounding words can become an obstacle as students learn new vocabulary and often limit the success of phonics instruction in meeting its ultimate goal—comprehension.” (p. 30) The authors found in a recent study that students often confuse the meanings of words that are similar. Children will say that *troop* means “don’t tell lies” (truth) or that *thorn* is “like if you rip somebody’s paper” (torn).

Louisa Cook Moats has described the “word poverty” of some children, especially minorities, English language learners, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Some word-impoorished first-grade children may know only about 5,000 words when other children their age know 20,000 words. Often, “linguistically disadvantaged students suffer from partial knowledge of word meanings, confusion over similar-sounding words, and limited knowledge of how and when to use words (Moats, 2001).” (p. 31) Research suggests a poor vocabulary in first grade predicts not only reading ability at the end of first grade but also a child’s 11th grade reading comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997, in this database).

Learning a word involves learning how it sounds, how it is written, and what it means. It includes knowing its multiple meanings and knowing how it is used as a part of speech. It helps to know its morphology (derivation) as well. Teachers need to teach all these dimensions of word meaning, not just focus on one dimension. The dimensions interact with each other too. For instance, knowing how a word is spelled often causes someone to notice how it is pronounced (Ehri, 2000). Comparing and contrasting words based on different features (spelling, pronunciation, meaning) helps students categorize and store words in memory. “Instruction that focuses on the multiple dimensions of a word will provide students with more secure knowledge than will instructional approaches that focus on only one of the word’s dimensions.” (p. 31)

Anchored word instruction can provide this rich instruction. The teacher can read the word in a story to help students with word meaning. She can ask students to point to the word to help them focus on spelling. She can ask students to orally elongate the sounds in the word to help students connect the sounds to the spelling. [Juel describes this method in her 2003 article, “Walking with Rose,” in this database.]

Research shows that teachers rarely use this approach with oral vocabulary (Biemiller, 2001). Teachers of young children mostly use “context-based mentioning” to address

unknown words. While reading, if they come to a difficult word, they will parenthetically define it or connect it to students' experience, and then move on.

"A number of reading researchers (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Biemiller, 2001b; Nagy, 1988) believe that vocabulary instruction must be more analytic and substantial for words to really stick." (p. 31) They suggest that analytic vocabulary instruction should include

- a focus on words that are important in the text and useful to know, and on words that are uncommon in everyday speech but common in books
- clear explanations and examples of word meanings in various contexts, giving students opportunities to discuss, analyze, use, and compare words
- opportunities for students to hear words in varied contexts and relate them to their own experiences and new knowledge
- encouragement for students to use words in new contexts

The authors designed a 6-week study comparing the 3 forms of vocabulary instruction described above in 6 kindergarten classrooms with 92 students. They called the 3 forms of instruction the *Contextual Condition*, *Analytic Condition*, and *Anchored Condition*. In the contextual condition, "teachers related word meanings to students' background knowledge. In the analytic condition, teachers related words to students' background knowledge *and* engaged students in analyzing word meanings." In the anchored condition, "teachers related words to students' background knowledge, engaged students in active analysis of words, *and* called students' attention to words' component letters and sounds." (p. 32)

For the study, teachers used a scripted curriculum. A sample of the script is provided for each of the three approaches. Since instruction took roughly the same amount of time in each condition, the anchored instruction (which focused on phonics as well as meaning) spent less time on personal experiences and word meaning in order to spend some time on the words' letters and sounds.

After controlling for students' general vocabulary knowledge, letter-naming fluency, and backgrounds, they found that, "On average, students in the analytic and anchored conditions significantly outperformed students in the contextual condition on the post-test." (p. 33) The differences between the analytic and anchored conditions, however, were not statistically significant.

"Our findings confirm previous research suggesting that instruction that engages students in active analysis of word meanings is more effective in promoting learning than instruction that only has students relate words to their background knowledge and personal experiences." (pp. 33–34) Although there was no difference in results between the analytic and anchored conditions, the authors argue that at least this shows that reducing time spent on word meaning in order to also focus on sound and spelling did not detract from the effectiveness of the lesson. With a longer study, they hypothesize that anchored word learning might prove to be more helpful for those students with limited literacy skills.

Quote(s): "Teachers can make vocabulary meaningful and memorable for younger students by anchoring new words in multiple contexts." (p. 30)

"Teachers in the early elementary grades need to be more attuned to extending students' meaningful vocabularies. They should take every

opportunity to connect vocabulary words to texts, to other words, and to some concrete orthographic features within words.” (p. 34)

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