Service Learning: Flooding Students with Vocabulary through Read Alouds

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Abstract: In the spirit of the Steven Stahl 600 Book Kid Challenge, 90 preservice teachers engaged children in 36 read-aloud sessions for a vocabulary improvement service learning project. This article describes how the pre-service teachers used narrative and informational books as a vehicle for rare-word vocabulary exposure for children ages 8–12.

Keywords: service learning, vocabulary, read alouds, strategies

This article describes a vocabulary-intensive service learning project that arose from a request by the chancellor of The University of Mississippi that colleges and schools within the university connect with the community. This request found fertile ground in the School of Education where 90 preservice teachers provided service for 60 African American students ages 8–12, enrolled in the Boys and Girls Club after-school program. In this article we describe the goals of the service learning project and activities for teaching vocabulary that the preservice teachers found to be most successful with upper elementary and middle school students.

We selected the Boys and Girls Club for our service learning project because of its large after-school population. A substantial number of the students come from low socioeconomic households. The mission of the Boys and Girls Club (2011) is "to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens."

Read-aloud sessions, with a focus on vocabulary learning, is one way our project attempted to meet the mission of the Boys and Girls Club. A strong correlation between comprehension and vocabulary knowledge has been established (Pearson, Hiebert, and Kamil 2007; National Reading Panel 2000). Our goal was to promote word consciousness that would help the students develop the comprehension and communication skills necessary for school and life success as productive caring citizens. Word consciousness, an umbrella term, includes the knowledge of definitional, multiple, and nuanced word meanings. In addition, it includes the appreciation for words and their power to evoke images and emotions.

Students with small vocabulary lexicons have a more difficult time finding the “right word” to communicate their thoughts. Furthermore, they have a difficult time understanding the ideas of others if their knowledge of word meanings is scant. Through exposure to fiction and informational books we attempted to increase the number of words the students know through three levels of instruction.

Incidental word learning: exposure only where students hear the word used in context
Informal word instruction: brief emphasis and instruction where students are cued to listen for targeted words and are given student-friendly definitions during reading
Formal instruction: two words, selected for their usefulness and importance, are taught and reviewed explicitly through planned activities

The following section offers important insights into the vocabulary learning gap and its impact on future school success. Understanding the root causes of the learning gap is the first step in trying to overcome it.
The Vocabulary Gap

In their landmark study on vocabulary acquisition, Hart and Risley (1995) found that differences in vocabulary size varied considerably among socioeconomic groups and were correlated with the infamous reading achievement gap. Hart and Risley’s research was the impetus for the goal of our service learning project, which was to help close the “word gap” between advantaged and disadvantaged students through read-aloud sessions. Reading to children builds vocabulary (Hall and Moats 1999). Weitzman et al. (2004) found “that even modest literacy-promoting interventions can significantly enhance a young child’s early literacy environment by increasing the frequency of parent-child book-sharing activities” (1248). When children participate in shared book experiences at a young age and are continually exposed to such experiences throughout their school years, literacy continues to be promoted through rich interactive experiences both in school and at home.

Students acquire most of their vocabulary from books, not conversations—even conversations with college-educated adults. Conversations with college-educated adults contain 17.3 rare words per 1,000, whereas children’s books contain 30.9 rare words per 1,000 (Hayes and Ahrens 1988). The term rare words is defined by Hayes and Ahrens (1988) and Stahl and Nagy (2006) to mean words that are not found in the 10,000 most frequently used English words, are not proper names or numbers, and are not inflected forms of commonly used words. Some rare words listed by Stahl and Nagy (2006, 127) are debris, quaint, and soar; basic synonyms of these words are the ones most often used in conversation.

Struggling readers read fewer books and the books they read have fewer rare words, thereby perpetuating the vocabulary deficit. Therefore, it is important that teachers of English and academic content areas fill this vocabulary void by reading vocabulary-rich books and other text genres including newspaper and magazine articles to struggling readers in the upper grades. Steven Stahl’s 600 Book Kid program, introduced by Dodson (2010) at the LETRES Summit, sets forth an ambitious goal because students benefit from the repeated exposure to words (McKeown and Beck 2006; Jenkins, Stein, and Wysocki 1984). Obviously, due to the length of the books and a lack of time in the upper grades, teachers will not be able to read three full books to their students each day. However, middle school and secondary teachers can create their own variations of Stahl’s program by scheduling the reading of carefully selected short passages from books and other genres each day with the goal of flooding students with a rich array of words.

Service

The students enjoyed learning about other children who go to school in a different country. They really loved hearing Pakistan’s version of the Pledge of Allegiance. I do not think the students had thought that each country had a Pledge of Allegiance. (Katherine, preservice teacher)

By the end of the 36 sessions over 12 weeks, the students at the Boys and Girls Club had opportunities to listen to 72 books and 36 poems or songs. Although they were not exposed to 600 books, the books they heard in the after-school program, combined with books read in the classroom, pushed the total number of books closer to Stahl’s 600-book goal.

Preservice teachers found that the most effective way to keep the students engaged was to plan novel, fast-paced, one-hour read-aloud sessions with lots of active student participation. The preservice teachers brought in music, visuals, props, and wore hats and costumes related to the themes of the books. They often brought little rewards, including bookmarks, erasers, stickers, and other small prizes to sustain student interest. During the reading of Edgar Allen Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart, one preservice teacher simply darkened the room during the reading and the students loved it!

Learning

This experience has taught me that it is not difficult to use strategies when teaching vocabulary. It was amazing how easy these strategies can be implemented and how much the students enjoyed and learned from them. (Kasey, preservice teacher)

Ninety preservice teachers learned how to select vocabulary-rich narrative and informational books, rare words, and research-based vocabulary strategies to use with their students. Their goal was to plan ways to immerse the students in a word flood where they selected three words to teach explicitly, identified from five to eight words to emphasize informally during reading, and selected vocabulary-rich books to expose students incidentally to countless other words. The targeted words, like gigantic waves, made a direct impact on the students; the hundreds of other words, like little waves lapping at their feet, were learned incidentally at a contextual level. Incidental word learning is essential for large-scale vocabulary building because students intentionally acquire a deep understanding of only 10–15 new rare words each week, approximately 260–400 of the 3,000 words learned each year (Stahl and Nagy 2006).

The students were divided by age (8–9 and 10–12) among four classrooms for one-hour read-aloud sessions three times a week. Preservice teachers, some
working with a partner, were required to read two books and a poem or song all based on the same theme twice during the semester. They spent 45 minutes reading and 15 minutes on related vocabulary strategies. Time limited them in the length of the books they could choose. These time constraints were dealt with in different ways. Many chose short picture books with rich vocabulary, while others selected portions of longer books to read. Reading a part of the book was easier for informational books than for narrative books that had a beginning, middle, and end with a continuous plot. Through this read-aloud experience, preservice teachers met four different learning goals: (1) criteria for selecting high-interest, high-vocabulary books; (2) ways to engage students during read alouds; (3) criteria for selecting words to teach explicitly and emphasize indirectly; and (4) strategies for engaging students in high-energy, high-involvement vocabulary activities.

With experience being the best teacher, the lessons learned by the preservice teachers provide important information and insights for others who choose to use read alouds as part of their vocabulary program.

**Read-Aloud Techniques to Engage Students through Interaction**

I believe the first key to having a successful read-aloud is to make the book come alive. (Haley, preservice teacher)

The preservice teachers were acutely aware that they were trying to sustain the attention and interest of a group of 10–15 students who had just completed 7.5 hours of school and a Boys and Girls Club “power hour,” a time when they sat quietly and worked on homework. They could not conduct the one-hour read-aloud session as an extension of school. “Make it as unschool-like as possible” became their mantra. Although they had serious learning objectives for word exposure and word learning, they had to help the students master their objectives through interactive research-based tasks and strategies.

Preservice teachers found that the students were most interested in stories and informational texts when they could interact with some of the passages as the books were being read. Interaction by the students could take many forms, such as identifying targeted vocabulary by holding up word cards as they heard them during the reading, repeating or chanting parts of the text, using facial expressions or gestures, or making sound effects such as stomping their feet, making whistling sounds for the wind, or imitating a beating heart.

**Selecting Books**

I learned that it takes a lot of planning to find two appropriate books that can be tied in together. (Katherine, preservice teacher)

The preservice teachers were required to select one informational and one narrative book that contained rich vocabulary. Both books had to be based on the same theme. In addition, they found a related poem or song. Choosing narrative books with themes that matched informational books was difficult because themes explicitly stated in informational books were not always easily identified in narrative books. Furthermore, the vocabulary in an informational book was not always repeated in the narrative book. In these instances, the preservice teachers had to find ways to bridge vocabulary from one book to the other through brief discussions of the story using the rare words from informational books. The effort was worth it because rare words introduced in one book and repeated during the reading of the companion book enabled students to hear how words are used in different contexts.

**Engaging Students during Read Alouds**

We learned that knowledge of the book is necessary when choosing parts to skip and tell to the students. (Daniel, preservice teacher)

Preservice teachers learned that reading aloud to students takes a lot of planning. They knew not to pick up a book and begin reading it without having first read it and determined ways to milk it for entertainment, engagement, and learning. Due to the one-hour time limit, the preservice teachers learned to “skip and tell” portions of the longer chapter books and informational texts. Finding places to skip and tell rather than reading word for word took careful planning for both genres. Preservice teachers learned how to vary the pace and pitch of their voice; use simple props, music, and movement to build interest and suspense; and approach the task of reading with enthusiasm and excitement.

**Selecting Words to Teach Explicitly and Emphasize Indirectly**

My partner and I looked for high level words that were useful. We listed all the words from the book that fit our criteria and then narrowed the list to three words to teach explicitly. (Liza, preservice teacher)

The words the preservice teachers selected for the students to learn had to be rare but also useful and encountered frequently. Preservice teachers used Tier Two and Tier Three word categories to guide them in their word selection. The following definitions of Tier One, Two, and Three words are based on the work of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002).

**Tier One:** The everyday words most students have heard, understood, and used (e.g., happy).

**Tier Two:** Synonyms of Tier One words and inflected root words. These words are more sophisticated, yet frequently used. They build on prior knowledge and are more precise (e.g., elated).

**Tier Three:** Words specific to literature and academic content (e.g., biosphere, staccato, and amulet).
Vocabulary Strategies Used before, during, and after Read-Aloud Sessions

The instruction to the students at the Boys and Girls Club had to be short and snappy to maintain their interest. The incidental teaching during the reading had to promote word consciousness and interest without breaking the spell of the story or flow of information. Before each read-aloud session, preservice teachers added the three explicitly taught words to a word wall and reviewed the words previously taught. They used visuals to create a room environment connected to the topic of their books. The students had choices of seating: some sat at tables, others on couches, and some sat on the floor. The strategies described in this article come from leading vocabulary experts and have been kid tested in an after-school setting. Good ideas abound, but students deserve to be engaged in evidence-based lessons that give them the best opportunity to learn. The following activities provide teachers a variety of ways to engage their students in word learning at different times during the lesson. Although tested on children ages 8–12, these activities can be easily adapted for upper middle and secondary students.

Start-of-Session General Word Review

The purpose of the general review is to provide students with multiple encounters with previously learned words over time. All words introduced and taught to the students were posted on a word wall. In middle school and secondary classrooms, words for word walls can be taken from literature and other content areas such as mathematics, science, history, and the fine arts.

Strategy: Hangman. Choose a word from the word wall and write a definition of the word that cannot be seen by the students. Draw a gallows and mark one space for each letter of the word on a white board or chart paper. Read the word’s definition and ask students to name a letter they think is in the word. If the letter is in the word, write it in the correct space. If the letter is not in the word, draw one part of a person hanging from the gallows. Teachers can vary the hangman theme to match their curriculum. “A Meteor is Coming. Save the Earth!” was a themed variation used by a preservice teacher. After selecting the words to teach explicitly, she posted a picture of the Earth inside the middle of its orbit, drew other concentric orbits around the picture, and marked one space for each letter of the word underneath. She followed the same format as the hangman activity, but when the students guessed a letter that was not in the word, she moved the meteor (a ping pong ball with tape) closer to the Earth, advancing it one circle closer to the Earth each time a letter was called that was not in the word. She wrote the letters that were named correctly in the spaces under the picture. The students could save the Earth if they named all the letters in the word before the meteor struck.

Pre-Reading

A critical stage for word learning occurs before students encounter words in the context of books. To learn word meanings, students need to be exposed to new words up to 10 times. However, the number of required exposures with these same words is reduced to two if they are encountered prior to hearing them read (Baker, Simmons, and Kame’enui 1995). The following pre-reading strategy acquaints the students with new words and has them analyze their meaning before hearing the definition.

Strategy: Morphemic word building. Knowledge of word parts enables students to use known words to build new words (Biemiller 2001; Moats 2000). The activity described here can be made more challenging for older students by teaching them Greek and Latin root words and affixes.

Prepare individual word cards with root words and affixes that relate to words from the word wall or the two or three words that are slated to be explicitly taught. Divide the class into groups. Give each group a pack of word cards that contains one root word and multiple affixes. Students build as many words as possible in one minute. The group who builds the most words reads their list to the class and can receive a prize (adapted from Brassell and Flood 2004, 41).

During Reading

The purpose is to keep students engaged and listening for targeted vocabulary words during reading and to assess listening comprehension and word learning. Pause during reading to emphasize or comment on important words. Strike a balance between maintaining the spell of the story, the flow of information, and the emphasis on word learning.

Strategy: Yea/nay. Write two or three interesting questions related to the targeted words. Prepare one “yea” and one “nay” card for each student to hold up in response to a teacher-prepared question. For example: “Would a corpse be a good conversationalist?” (Blachowicz and Fischer 2002, 142). After asking the question, give students 10–15 seconds to think before holding up their cards. One way to make sure students wait to show their card is to raise both your arms and tell students they are not to show their yea or nay card until you lower your arms. Do this gesture dramatically! Let students who chose a different answer than expected to explain their thinking (Archer 2010).

After Reading

The use of strategies after reading capitalizes on students’ new word learning. They’ve been introduced to
words, engaged briefly with their meaning, and listened to them in context. Now is the time to strike, while the iron is hot, by engaging students with strategies that review and deepen this initial word learning.

**Strategy: Linking experiences and reading network, LEARN—Themed graphic organizers for word learning.** This activity can be done with the entire class, small groups, or individual students. To set up the graphic organizer for a monster theme, draw an oval in the middle of a large sheet of chart paper and write the word in the oval. Direct students to recall their experiences related to the word. For example, for *ecstatic*, students will recall instances of being ecstatic. For each experience students draw and connect legs, neck, head, tail, and spiny protrusions to the oval. Create graphic organizers for other tasks related to the word including synonyms, antonyms, student-created sentences, and words constructed with affixes (Holmes 2000).

**Conclusions**

By exposing students to thousands of words explicitly, informally, and incidentally, the integrity of the service learning project was upheld for all participants. Service to the students, of course, varied from student to student. Some said they didn’t like books before but now they did, and most demonstrated that they learned the meanings of the words from the word wall. They were especially excited when the words they learned matched the topics they had learned or were learning in school. Learning for the preservice teachers was profound. They learned that their choice of rare words had to be judicious because so few words could be taught directly to the students. They learned that teaching vocabulary was more than copying words and their definitions from the dictionary. They learned that they should use multiple strategies to engage students with words in multiple contexts. They learned the value of selecting strategies that engaged students at the word and contextual levels. An unexpected bonus occurred when preservice teachers learned the value of knowing the students they teach. Because they met with two different groups of students during the 12 weeks, they never had the opportunity to know their students. They realized that they had to know their interests and academic and behavioral needs in order to capture and maintain their interest and involvement. This first-hand experience taught them the importance of using assessment to guide their lesson planning.

Although the service learning project described in this article was for students ages 8–12, it can be extended to students in middle and high school where it is essential that they develop strong vocabularies needed to for school and career success. The principles of effective vocabulary instruction, such as multiple encounterers with words and using words in multiple contexts, are the same for all ages. The pairing of fiction and informational text lends itself to content-area thematic learning that takes place in middle and secondary classrooms. Furthermore, the activities described in this article would appeal to older students because they are lively and novel. Settings for the read-alouds, such as classrooms, school libraries, and places within the community, provide opportunities for the authentic application of academic knowledge and skills. Preservice teachers eagerly joined in the activities as they were learning them in their college classes, showing that well planned activities that encourage active engagement appeal to students of all ages.

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