

STUDY GUIDE FOR

Bringing Words to Life

Robust Vocabulary Instruction

SECOND EDITION

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Hundreds of thousands of teachers have used *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* to help K-12 students enlarge their vocabulary and get involved in noticing, understanding, and using new words. Grounded in research, the book explains how to select words for instruction, introduce their meanings, and create engaging learning activities that promote both word knowledge and reading comprehension. To support teachers in learning from the book and using it most effectively in their classrooms, we (Isabel Beck and Margaret McKeown) developed this chapter-by-chapter Study Guide. Although individual teachers may find this guide helpful, the activities and discussion suggestions are geared toward professional learning communities, especially book study groups.

This Study Guide has been structured so that group participants will read one chapter and then discuss that chapter at a subsequent meeting. The discussion topics and questions for each chapter are provided in the material that follows. In some instances, an activity included in the Discussion section of the guide asks participants to complete an activity before the next meeting and then share it with the study group at that meeting. These activities are marked with 🌀 to alert participants that, beyond reading the assigned chapter, something needs to be completed before the next meeting.

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GETTING STARTED

In the Preface to the first edition of *Bringing Words to Life* (2002), we, the authors, shared vignettes from our own “vocabulary biographies” (see the Appendix at the end of this Study Guide). Subsequently, we have heard many vocabulary stories—memories from childhood, things young children said, and even misunderstandings of words. So with the notion that everyone has a vocabulary story, we hope that reading ours will trigger one of your own vocabulary stories, which can be shared at the beginning of your first/next book study meeting.

CHAPTER 1

Rationale for Robust Vocabulary Instruction

(pp. 1–18)

Overview

This chapter touches on the theory and research that are the foundation of robust vocabulary instruction. Among the topics discussed in this chapter are that knowing a word is not an all-or-nothing proposition; why deriving meanings for unknown words from naturally occurring text is difficult; and why direct instruction is important. Additionally, the chapter presents a three-tiers framework that can be used to facilitate choosing which words to teach. The focus is on teaching Tier Two—words found in written language across a variety of domains—because of the large role they play in a language user’s repertoire. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of making vocabulary instruction lively and engaging.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- Participants should share their “vocabulary stories.”
- Considering how the authors have described word learning and the kinds of activities they have used, what do you think is meant by “robust instruction”?
- Why is independent reading not adequate in order for students to develop their vocabularies?
- What kind of vocabulary instruction affects comprehension, and what evidence is there for that kind?

- Discuss the meaning of the statement “students need to develop an interest in and an awareness of words” and that vocabulary instruction needs to foster that directly. Why is it important for students to develop an interest in and awareness of words?
- Discuss some of the instructional activities that the authors suggest are rich and lively.

CHAPTER 2

Choosing Words to Teach

(pp. 19–39)

Overview

A fundamental issue for vocabulary instruction is determining which words to teach. This chapter points to the three-tiers framework as a useful device for identifying good word candidates for instruction as it provides criteria for selecting Tier Two words. Throughout the chapter, there are examples of the criteria that were applied to text and a discussion of why specific words were chosen for instruction.

Comments

In order to practice choosing Tier Two words, during the initial reading of this chapter, when you get to the “You Try It” at the bottom of p. 26, do the activity *before* you read the authors’ analysis of the words they identified. (The authors’ analysis follows right after the “You Try It.”) By holding off, you can compare your responses with the author’s responses.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- Describe and discuss the three-tiers framework. In addition to information in this chapter, you may want to review the first two paragraphs on p. 9.
- What are the two criteria needed for determining whether a word is suitable to teach to young children?
- Take some time now and do the “You Try It” on p. 26. You may want to work with a partner or a small group. When you have finished the “You Try It,” come together as a group to talk about how your choices compare to the authors’ discussion of *their* choices.

- 🌐 Complete the “Your Turn” on p. 39, and compare and discuss your responses with the members of the book study group at the next book study meeting.

CHAPTER 3

Introducing Word Meanings

(pp. 40–54)

Overview

Chapter 3 considers problematic issues of relying on dictionary definitions as the cornerstone of vocabulary instruction. Instead, the chapter introduces the notion of *student-friendly explanations*. Two requirements for student-friendly explanations are introduced and discussed, and examples are provided. This chapter also includes issues associated with multiple meanings of words. (*Note:* More examples of student-friendly explanations will be provided in subsequent chapters.)

Discussion Topics and Questions

- What are the authors’ suggestions about *if* and *when* to present words with multiple meanings (pp. 49–52)?
- What are some of the problems associated with dictionary definitions that can make it difficult for learners to understand meanings of unknown words?
- Student-friendly explanations have two important features. They need to (1) capture the essence of the word, and (2) explain what the word means in everyday language. Discuss those features.
- Below are a dictionary definition and a student-friendly explanation for the word *sumptuous*. Discuss the differences:
 - Of a size or splendor suggesting great expense; lavish.
 - Something that is sumptuous is magnificent and obviously expensive.
- Take some time now to write student-friendly explanations for several of the following words: *unique*, *anonymous*, *resemble*, *vanish*, *urge*. It is helpful to anchor your explanations in *something*, *someone*, *describes* (e.g., *If something is unique . . .*). Come together and share and compare your explanations with the other members of the book study group.

CHAPTER 4

Bringing Vocabulary into the Earliest Grades

(pp. 55–81)

Overview

At the beginning of this chapter, the authors point out that teaching young children sophisticated words (Tier Two words) has been studied by researchers, including ourselves, with the findings that young children can learn big words and that learning them has an effect on their literacy growth. The chapter then provides the robust introductory word routine and offers some examples of following up to prompt students to use the words.

Activity

Take some time now and select a read-aloud story and choose two or three Tier Two words from it. (Participants might want to find a partner or several participants and engage in the activity together.) Or you can choose from the words we suggest from one of the three stories we discuss on p. 61. However, you will need to have access to the story in order to present the first step below. It is important that you choose more than one word—two or three—because that allows you to develop follow-up activities that bring words together and deal with how they might relate to one another. However, before bringing words together, take each of your words through the seven steps below. Then you can do more follow-up with all the words you are using.

- Take each of your words through the following seven introductory word steps:
 1. Describe the story context for the word (pp. 62, 64).
 2. Present the meaning in student-friendly wording (p. 65). Plan for students to say the word initially and several times across the remaining steps.
 3. Provide an example or two of the word in contexts other than the original context (p. 66).
 4. Develop prompts for students to provide examples. When students mimic the story context, encourage them to think of a different context (pp. 63, 69).
 5. Now and then, do a spot check by asking “What’s the word that means _____?” and the reverse, “What does the word _____ mean?”

6. Provide a short follow-up. Here you could use the formats in the “You Try It” on p. 69. (*Note:* Some examples of following-up activities are provided in this chapter, and many more will be presented in Chapter 5.)
7. When each of your words has gone through steps 1–7, create a follow-up that includes all the words you chose to teach.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- Come together as a group and share and discuss the instruction you developed with the book study group.
- How difficult was it to develop the various steps of the introductory routine? What do you think you learned? What more would you like to know about any of the steps? How might you use all or a portion of the instruction you developed?
- If most of the participants did not develop instruction, provide participants with a word (you can choose words from p. 61) and, as a group, take the word through each of the steps in the introductory routine on p. 62. Have participants discuss why each of the steps is included.

CHAPTER 5

Instructional Sequences for Later Grades

(pp. 82–102)

Overview

Throughout this chapter, and indeed through this book, we have emphasized the importance of keeping vocabulary work going beyond the initial introductory routine. The reason this is so essential to learning new words is that words can only truly be learned through use. The nuance, subtleties, and characteristic of a word’s role in the language can only be understood through repeated exposures to the word in a variety of contexts. The need for multiple uses becomes even more critical at the upper grades because the words are more sophisticated and thus more multidimensional, and the distinctions among them are subtler. Whether the context for the words that are targeted is a sixth-grade novel, a ninth-grade short story, or a classic high school piece, the vocabulary work in the upper grades is more rooted to a text and is dealt with in ways that both teaches the word and brings enriched

understanding to the text. It can bring attention to how authors use words, and thus what role a word might play in what the author is communicating—an important feature of *close reading*. These sorts of things can certainly be done with younger students, but there can be a more rigorous focus with older students.

Activity

- ☉ Target one of the grade bands (upper elementary, pp. 88–93; middle school, pp. 94–98; high school, pp. 98–102). Choose a story or novel that you know well, and have taught or plan to teach. Since it should be a piece that you know, you should be able to flip through it and choose Tier Two words easily. Choose between 5 and 10 words.
- ☉ Write student-friendly definitions for those words. And try to provide at least one alternate definition for several of the words (see “Additional Features” at the bottom of p. 85).
- ☉ Keep the text with you as you read Chapter 5 and think about the kinds of activities described (e.g., *facets of word meaning*, *relationship among words*, *word associations*, *writing*, *returning to the word context*, and more). Would a given activity work with the words you plan to teach? Which ones?
- ☉ Take some time now and create follow-up activities for the words you chose to target like those activities offered.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- Share the instruction you developed with the book study group.
- How difficult or not difficult was it to develop the various steps of the follow-up activities? What do you think you learned? What more would you like to know about any of the activities? How might you use all or some of the activities you developed in your classes?
- Discuss the idea that activities for the upper grades are more “rooted in text” and the extent to which the activities you created reflect that concept. How does this approach correspond to *close reading*?

CHAPTER 6

Assessing and Maintaining New Vocabulary

(pp. 103–116)

Overview

In this chapter we discuss two topics that go beyond the introductory and follow-up instructional activities that we have been describing. The first is assessment of students' learning. Here a key concept is that many different kinds of activities can serve as assessment. What undergirds a decision on the kinds of assessment to be presented is the goal of the learning. The second topic in this chapter is maintaining words in students' repertoires after the initial set of instructional activities.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of multiple-choice tests?
- Discuss some assessments that tap deeper knowledge.
- What kind of assessments can be developed for young children, who do not yet read?
- 🌟 Try the “You Try It” at the bottom of p. 108 and share your work with the book study group.
- What are some ways of maintaining attention to words during the school day?
- Discuss Word Wizard. How might you use it with your students?

CHAPTER 7

Working with Instructional and Natural Contexts

(pp. 117–138)

Overview

This chapter focuses on deriving word meanings from two kinds of contexts. Instructional contexts are those that have been deliberately created with the intention of providing strong clues to a word's meaning. The other kind is naturally occurring contexts, prose that authors create to tell a story or provide information on a given topic. Such authors' goals are to create

good prose, not to provide context clues. Thus, natural contexts vary widely in the amount of information they provide about a given word. Because of the unreliability of natural contexts, instruction needs to be presented as a *process* of figuring out word meaning within a context, rather than focus on the *product*.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- Discuss the differences between instructional contexts and naturally occurring contexts.
- Take some time now and divide the study group into partners or small groups—assign each group a different word. Ask them to create a naturally occurring context and an instructional context for their assigned word. Bring the groups together and have them share their work (possible words: *splendid, annoy, reluctant, appropriate, imitate*).
- Discuss the statement that, given the unreliability of natural contexts, instruction needs to be presented as a *process* of figuring out word meanings within a context, rather than focus on the *product*—a word’s meaning.
- Take a few minutes now to complete two of the three items in #2 of “Your Turn” on p. 138. Then, as a group, discuss your responses to these items.
- Wrap up the discussion by considering if there were some questions that seemed most effective.

CHAPTER 8

Vocabulary and Writing

(pp. 139–152)

Overview

Although intuition suggests there has to be a relationship between vocabulary and writing, there is very little research about that relationship. What little research there is tends to affirm the relationship. Most importantly, the available research supports the notion that it is not just any kind of vocabulary instruction that affects writing. Rather, to affect writing the instruction has to be robust.

Discussion Topics and Questions

- Yonek’s (2008) study was an extensive study to directly determine the effects of two kinds of vocabulary instruction—traditional and robust—on writing. Discuss how Yonek developed the study so that only one variable—kind of instruction—was different for each group (pp. 144–145). What were the results of word-level assessments (pp. 145–146)?
- Discuss the following two points from the Yonek (2008) and Duin and Graves (1987) studies:
 - Yonek chose instructional words that fit with the writing topic. All students learned the same words, yet the robust group used more words in their essays.
 - Duin and Graves suggest that teaching writing as part of vocabulary instruction improves the quality of student writing.
- How do those results affect the way you think about the intersection of writing and vocabulary?
- Discuss how you might induce your students to use the vocabulary words they are learning in their writing.

CHAPTER 9

Differentiating Vocabulary Instruction

(pp. 153–171)

Overview

In this chapter, we consider how to differentiate vocabulary instruction to address the special needs of students who struggle with literacy learning and students for whom English is a second language. In both cases, the most effective instruction for enhancing vocabulary knowledge and affecting comprehension follows the same principles of robust instruction. But students who struggle because of their ability or language status may need supplements to instruction. One model for students who were having difficulty in literacy learning is response to intervention (RTI), which provides differential groupings designed as tiers (not to be confused with word tiers!).

Discussion Topics

- The three studies described on pp. 154–155 each attempted interventions to support students who were not doing well at learning Tier Two words.

Each study then provided similar supplementary instruction. What was the supplementary instruction? How did it differ from initial instruction?

- Remind participants that two words—*intensity* and *duration*—characterized supplementary instruction. Discuss what they refer to and how they can be implemented.
- As a group, analyze how each step in the “EL Teacher Materials for the Introduction of *Expose*” (pp. 164–165) attempts to support EL students. A good way to proceed is to have a group member read the material for Context 1 aloud, stopping to have participants suggest how the bolded material attempts to support EL students.
- If participants find the analysis activity useful and time permits, you can continue with Context 2, toward the bottom of p. 165.

CHAPTER 10

Energizing the Verbal Environment

(pp. 172–182)

Overview

This chapter emphasizes the importance of creating a lively verbal environment in classrooms, and offers ways to do so. The focus here is on both using words that have been taught and taking opportunities to add words beyond those that are being explicitly taught. Examples of the important role of the teacher in influencing the environment are highlighted, and resources that students can use to discover and follow up on interesting words are presented. Here we are talking about an additional goal, beyond robust instruction—for students to become interested in and alert to words and their uses so that they develop word awareness.

Discussion Topics

- Develop some concrete examples of how you might implement ideas in the chapter to spur your students’ word awareness.
- Brainstorm some ways that you might bring forth your own interest and curiosity about words so they provide a model of interest in and alertness to words.

- 🌀 Find some fun pictures or graphics that you could use to prompt students to write captions using target words. Challenge the discussion group to come up with captions that use Tier Two words. (Suggestions: The Internet is a good source. Animal pictures are good candidates, as in the examples below.)



Margaret McKeown's cat, Big House.



Isabel Beck's dog, Chloe.

APPENDIX

For each of us authors, our attachment to words is an important driving force in the work represented in this book. Our own engagement with language spurred us to set goals for students that included depth of understanding, facility of use, and eagerness for word opportunities. So we thought it fitting to begin this book by each sharing a chapter from our own “verbal biographies”—our personal history as word learners. The narratives below reveal something about how vocabulary captured our attention and became important in our lives.

Isabel L. Beck

I remember learning the word *earnest*: it was in the fourth grade, and a character had been described as earnest. Miss Cohney, my teacher, talked about what it meant to be earnest and called on us to think of people we knew who were earnest and what they did that made them earnest. Clearly, *earnest* was a “good” word, and the seed to my owning it took root. It impressed me deeply to think about earnest behavior and earnest people. I wanted to be earnest myself.

At about the time I learned about earnest, I began to notice that other people were catching on to it, too. I started noticing the word in newspapers and even overheard it in a conversation. It was amazing to me that I was somehow part of a group of people across the country who had simultaneously discovered the word *earnest*! That experience was an important milestone in my fascination with vocabulary. What stayed with me forever, however, was the memory that I thought others had learned that word just when I had.

Margaret G. McKeown

Mrs. Cummings, my seventh-grade language arts teacher, took vocabulary learning very seriously. Every week she introduced a set of words and assigned us to write sentences about the words—pretty boring stuff. *But*—the next class would be devoted to sharing the sentences we had concocted, sprinkled liberally with commentary from Mrs. C.

I didn’t realize at the time, nor for some time afterward, just how Mrs. C so effectively enhanced our verbal repertoires. But by opening up word learning to group consideration and discussion, she effectively implanted those words and their uses in our growing minds.

And one discussion saved me from an embarrassing misinterpretation. The word was *infatuate*, and from the dictionary I found that it meant “to

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affect with folly,” which I took to refer to joking around and making someone laugh. The boy I sat next to in class did just that—always had something funny to say. So my sentence was “I’m infatuated with Tim Gray.” Luckily, before I had a chance to share my sentence with the class, the discussion of the word’s meaning led me to realize that it basically meant to have a crush on someone. Whew!

Linda Kucan

I think I was in the fourth grade when my parents gave me a missal, a prayer book in English and Latin. I discovered incredible words in that book, liturgical and biblical words such as *eternal*, *prodigal*, *litany*, and *benediction*. These words were linked to incense and ceremony, Sundays and holy days of obligation. I savored the sound of them in my head. Later, I found the words in books and other contexts, and even heard them in song lyrics and conversation. Always, the words evoked the circumstances in which I first learned them, and I believe they always will.

Reflections

Isabel Beck’s memory shows how word learning can lead to an enhanced awareness of words and their uses in the environment. Sometimes this happens spontaneously, and sometimes it does not. But becoming aware of words in one’s larger environment is a very important part of vocabulary learning because it leads to deeper understanding of familiar words that are noticed and learning of additional words. As such, supporting students’ word awareness needs to be attended to explicitly and systematically. In this book, word awareness within and beyond school is one of the themes we present.

Margaret McKeown’s close encounter with the wrong side of infatuation points out that a little word knowledge may be a dangerous thing. More importantly, it demonstrates the importance of discussing words, talking about their meanings, and sharing reactions in contrast to memorizing definitions. An important theme in this book is our approach to introducing word meaning. In particular we emphasize and demonstrate that dictionary definitions are a very limited form of getting to know a word.

Linda Kucan’s fascination with the sound and feel of words in her prayer book brings into play the beauty and power of language. It reminds us that words are the instruments that authors and poets use to enchant us, delight us, sadden us, amaze us. In this book we hope to remind you of the beauty and power of language, and provide a means to convey that beauty and power to your students.