

## Vocabulary Victory: Waging the Battle Against the 30-Million Word Gap

Audrey J. Childs, WTU Teacher Leader 2017-2018

### Rationale

The 30 million word gap is a phenomenon that has been deeply researched over at least 100 years. Researchers have proven that vocabulary knowledge is a high indicator of verbal ability and success, both in school and in the workplace. It contributes to phonological awareness and improves reading. However, children who grow up in poverty and lower socioeconomic status (SES) lack rich vocabulary sets. Children are restricted in the vocabulary they have learned before they start school, and have smaller vocabularies than their more advantaged classmates. As noted in a 2014 NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) article, "*The Word Gap: The Early Years Make the Difference*" written by Laura J. Colker, she quotes research by Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder in 2013. "*Children's vocabulary skills are linked to their economic backgrounds. By 3 years of age, there is a 30 million word gap between children from the wealthiest and poorest families. A recent study shows that the vocabulary gap is evident in toddlers. By 18 months, children in different socio-economic groups display dramatic differences in their vocabularies. By 2 years, the disparity in vocabulary development has grown significantly.*"

Developing partnerships between home and family has always been a challenge for public schools. Not all school systems, or individual schools have viable conduits by which teachers can communicate and share with families for various reasons. Not every school has a working Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Parent-teacher conferences do not always yield high turnouts where teachers can delve deeply into individual students' needs regarding literacy.

For teachers, there are some programs, such as *Foundations*, wherein the emphasis is phonics and phonemic awareness; and *Reading A to Z*, that has its emphasis in whole language and high frequency words. *Wordly Wise* and *Words Their Way* are programs for elementary and up. However, in my research for this project, I have found a dearth of published instructional kits for our youngest learners. There are flashcards with pictures, but nothing that is directly related to use of words in texts. Until school systems invest in a vocabulary curriculum on which teachers can be trained, and there is a proper rollout of its use with fidelity, there will continue to be gaps in our students' attainment of a multitude of new words. Biemiller writes on the consequences of an increased emphasis in phonics-that "while children learn to 'read' with increased phonics instruction, there have not been commensurate gains in *reading comprehension*...schools now do little to promote vocabulary development, particularly in the critical years before grade 3." (Biemiller, 2001).

So, knowing that this gap and disparity exists, it is incumbent upon teachers to provide opportunities for a rich and verbal classroom environment. Teachers must always look for ways to use interesting language, provide books, create visuals and encourage students, and overall, provide robust vocabulary instruction.

I selected 19 students from my PreKindergarten 4 classroom, to read a story, *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown. This is no more than I do with several regular read-aloud times during the day. My target focus was to select about six words that have been designated as Tier Two words, for vocabulary instruction. Tier Two words are defined as robust academic vocabulary words that students are likely to encounter across all topics and content areas. I wanted to assess how well students retained most of the words, through direct instruction and other activities.

### **Literature Review**

Researchers whose works informed this study are Isabel L. Beck, PhD who is Professor of Education in the School of Education and Senior Scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center, at the University of Pittsburgh. Her book, *“Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction”* is co-authored with Margaret G. McKeown, PhD, a research scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center, also at the University of Pittsburgh; and Linda Kucan, PhD, who is Assistant Professor in the Department of Instruction and Learning at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. In their seven-chapter book, they outline topics such as the rationale for robust vocabulary instruction and how to choose and develop vocabulary to teach from the earliest to later grades.

Ellen McKenzie in her article *“Vocabulary Development Using Visual Displays”* describes various approaches that are hands-on, interactive and engaging. She suggests graphic organizers, drawing and multimedia sources.

Michael F. Graves is Professor of Literacy Education and Guy Bond Fellow in Reading, in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota. His book *The Vocabulary Book: Learning and Instruction* begins with discussing the actual task students face in learning, and how teachers provide instruction. Next, he looks into the characteristics of effective instruction. In ensuing chapters, Graves provides procedures, empowering approaches students can take, and gives an example of “text talks” (some schools say “read-alouds”). These are times during the day when a teacher selects literature and “sophisticated words that are likely to appear in material students will read themselves in the future.”

Two other resources for understanding the importance of vocabulary instruction that I found valuable were *“Teaching Vocabulary: Early, Direct and Sequential”*, by Biemiller in *American Educator*, Spring 20001; and *“The Magic of Words: Teaching Vocabulary in the Early Childhood Classroom”* by Susan B. Neuman and Tanya S. Wright in *American Educator*, Summer 2014.

### **Data/Tools/Process**

I chose to read “Stone Soup” by Marcia Brown, to my entire class. The story is about three soldiers who came to a village as they walked home tired and hungry from a war. When they got to the village, they asked the residents for food and a place to sleep. The villagers had heard of “their kind” before, saying that they were always hungry and begging, so they hid all of their provisions, and made up excuses when the soldiers asked.

The soldiers said they would just have to make stone soup, so they asked the villagers to bring three large stones, to put in a big pot of hot water. The villagers brought the stones, and little by little, the soldiers said that the soup would be even more delicious if they had cabbage, carrots, meat, potatoes, etc. So little by little, the villagers were tricked into bringing their food items out of hiding, to add to the “stone soup”. They marveled at the wonderful soup that had been made, not realizing that they had made the soup out of everything they had hidden. At the end, the soldiers and the villagers had a feast together to celebrate the making of the soup.

I selected the following words from the story: *deceive*, *delicious*, *cupboard*, *broth*, *banquet*, and *splendid*. I had repeated readings of the story over two weeks, focusing on two words each day. All students were given the six words in a whole-group instructional setting. However, a group of ten randomly selected students were given more instructional activities (the “apples”) than the other group of nine students (the “oranges”); with a sequence of activities from Beck’s book, along with visuals and a graphic organizer.

Instruction for each of the words was conducted as follows:

\*The word was contextualized for its role in the story, e.g. the villagers and the soldiers held a *banquet* after the soup was made, so that everyone could eat.

\*The children were asked to repeat the word so they they could create a phonological representation (say the word).

\*The meaning of the word was explained. As I explained the meaning, I drew a picture, gave a similar meaning, used classroom items, pictures from the internet, or used body language to help the students understand.

**deceive:** to trick someone, not in a nice way, in order to get something you want

**delicious:** used synonyms (tasty, “something that makes your mouth happy when you eat it”, elicited food item responses), asked for non-examples.

**cupboard:** used a piece of play furniture from the dramatic play area

**broth:** gave each child a sip of chicken broth, discussed difference between broth and soup; asked when might you only be able to drink broth (illness, upset stomach)

**banquet:** a very big dinner with lots of guests at one big/long table; asked students what time of year might some families have a banquet-Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter were the responses; asked for non-examples (picnic, McDonalds)

**splendid:** something extra, especially nice. Asked children “What can be splendid?” Most made the connection between the effort it took to bring the banquet into being, everyone worked so hard and the soup was so good, that it was splendid.

\*Examples in contexts other than the one used in the story were provided.

\*Children interacted with examples (passed around pictures and did “Turn and Talks”)

\*Children said the word again to reinforce its phonological representation.

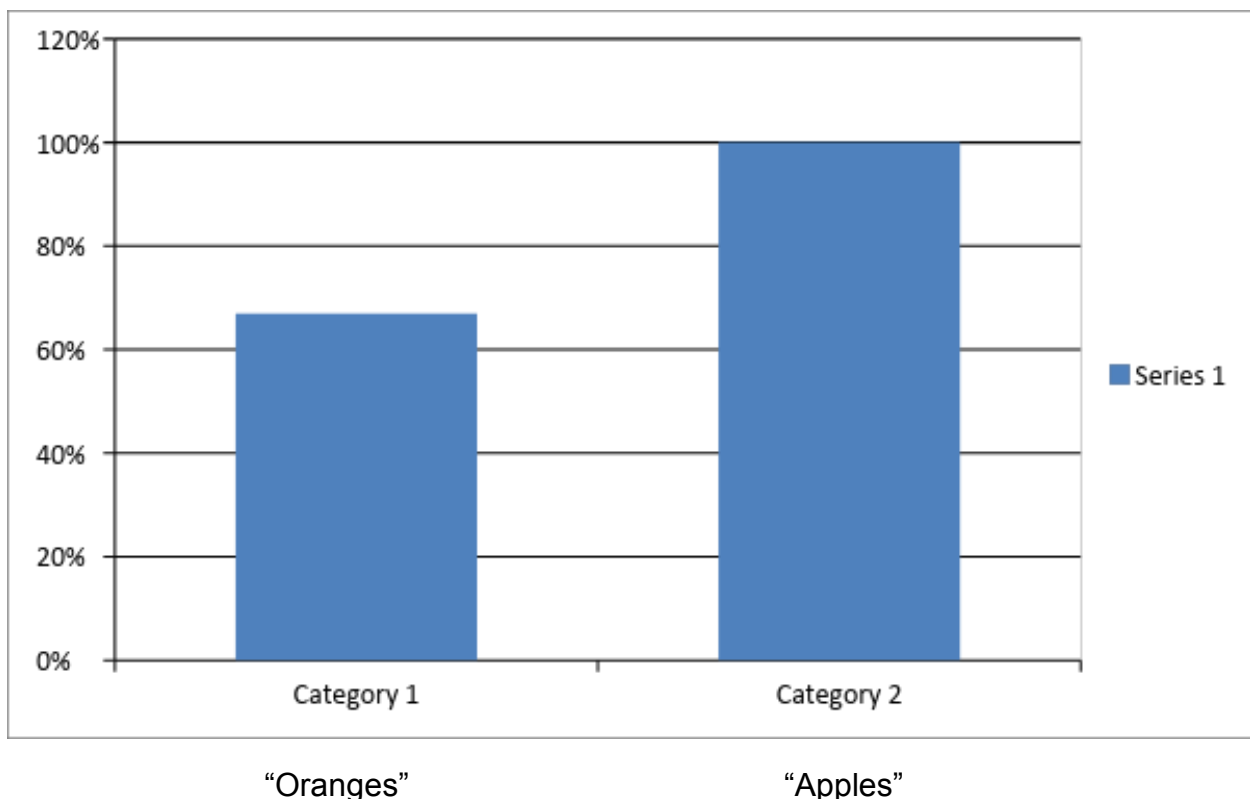
Three words per day were shared over two days, using this same manner of instruction for each of the six total words. One graphic organizer, the Frayer Model, was used for the word “splendid”. The Frayer Model is a four square model in which students and teachers define the word, list its characteristics, and give examples and non-examples of the target word.

On the third day, students were assessed to determine if they retained their knowledge of the words. They were asked to identify pictures, and tell which ones best matched the targeted vocabulary word. They were asked to explain each word, in their own way.

### Data Analysis

In the group that had only basic instruction of the words (9 students-the “oranges”), 67% of them retained the six instructed words. In the group that had more opportunities to engage with the words (10 students-the “apples”) 100% of the students not only retained all six words, but also were able to use them in a way that showed that they “owned” these words. They were able to explain their meaning, use them in sentences of their own, and during a Turn and Talk, shared how the words related to their lives. One student related going to a family wedding *banquet*, and another said that he had a *splendid* airplane ride to visit his grandma. My data aligns with the larger body of research about how children acquire word knowledge. Solid, concise, sequenced and methodical vocabulary instruction must be a part of every early childhood program.

Vocabulary Retention for Stone Soup



## **Recommendations**

While educators cannot totally fix the 30 million word gap, we can make sure that our youngest learners are exposed daily to rich vocabulary words. Neuman and Wright suggest use of five principles of effective oral vocabulary instruction:

- 1) Children need both explicit and implicit instruction.
- 2) Teachers need to be intentional in word selection.
- 3) Teachers should build word meaning through knowledge networks
- 4) Children need repeated exposure to gain vocabulary
- 5) Ongoing professional development is essential

## **References**

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