

## Bringing Vocabulary to Life

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### Abstract

*Vocabulary instruction is an important part of every classroom. Teachers and administrators continually seek effective instructional approaches to help students increase vocabulary knowledge. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the author used daily vocabulary journal activities with a class of 2nd grade students. This chapter first presents the process used for students to create their own vocabulary journal. Next, the authors describe a three-part instructional framework used to target vocabulary development using journals within a ten-minute lesson.*

**Keywords:** *vocabulary, journals, elementary instruction*

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Vocabulary directly impacts student comprehension and should be a focus of every classroom. Teachers and administrators continually seek effective instructional approaches to help students acquire new vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary journals promote exposure to new words in a fun and meaningful way. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the author used daily vocabulary journal activities with a class of 2nd grade students. This chapter presents a way to use journals in a three-part instructional framework for vocabulary instruction. The three sections included in vocabulary journals are word wall vocabulary, fluency phrases, and vocabulary meaning. Structuring vocabulary journals with these three components in mind crafted a spiraling effect for the development of specific skills associated with teaching words and their meanings. The vocabulary journal activities, using high frequency words, fluency practice, and new vocabulary words, were implemented during a 10 minute instructional time-frame. In

addition, the interactive journal activities were repeated every day and involved all learners. Each student experienced success, learned new words, and practiced reading during the process. During vocabulary journal activities, the second grade classroom was an active learning space where students were engaged and motivated learners.

### Rationale

*Why is vocabulary important?* To understand why classrooms need vocabulary journals, it is important to first understand the significance of vocabulary knowledge and concepts. Consider the relationship between the words “needle,” “scorpion,” “scale,” and “liberty.” The connection may be vague initially. However, knowing that these words are common references for body positions in cheerleading may clarify their relationship. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) stated that “learning new words is not done with just

exposure, but with repetition, contextualization, and authentic uses of the words in discussion, reading and writing” (p. 49). By teaching word relationships such as these, students use contextual information to make meaning. For the classroom teacher, this means that students need repeated exposure to new words, as well as knowledge in how to use them in real-world contexts.

Students benefit from explicit and intentional vocabulary instruction. All too often, teachers set too little time aside to focus on vocabulary. Fisher et al. (2016) stated, “Unfortunately, too many children and adolescents experience vocabulary instruction as making a passing acquaintances with a wide range of words” (p.49). When a teacher sets a time aside each day to address vocabulary learning in a direct and explicit manner, there are great dividends for learning. An intentional, daily approach enables the teacher to become strategic in supporting student learning with new vocabulary and possibly front-load specific words for upcoming instruction. Time devoted to explicit and intentional vocabulary instruction may also be used to reteach vocabulary that was lacking from a previous lesson.

Daily vocabulary instruction requires teachers to analyze specific vocabulary needs among students. For example, many students in my second grade class struggled with inferencing in relation to the traits and feelings of characters in a text at one point during the school year. I knew these students were able to infer, but they lacked the vocabulary needed to identify a specific character trait or to describe how a character was feeling. I knew my second graders would face standardized testing the following school year, and I wanted to ensure that all of my students had a firm grasp of character traits and feelings beyond simple words such as “sad,” “mad,” and “happy.” In order to address this instructional need, I began using vocabulary journals coupled with daily vocabulary instruction. By implementing a direct instructional approach (Anderson & Nagy,

1991), students benefited from repeated exposure to vocabulary words in varied contexts (Stahl, 2005), which led to enhanced language abilities (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) and deeper understandings of words (Stahl & Kapinus, 2001).

### **Instructional Framework**

*How do I set up my vocabulary time?* In order to ensure vocabulary learning is optimal, students need to know exactly what is expected of them (Kamil & Hiebert, 2005). With this in mind, I needed to first establish the importance of vocabulary words with my students. To do this, I created a lesson to illustrate how students use specific vocabulary in their everyday lives. I began the lesson by showing students a brown paper bag with an object hidden inside of it. I slowly pulled out the object – which was my dad’s biker vest - and began talking about the vest and how my dad learned new words as a biker. I emphasized some of these words, such as “hog,” “cut,” “colors,” “kickstands up,” and “tail gunner.” At first, students were confused as to how these words related to motorcycles. Thus, my vocabulary instruction became more direct as I further explained the “biker” vocabulary:

- A “hog” was a motorcycle.
- “Cut” referred to the vest.
- “Colors” indicated the motorcycle group you belong to by the colors on your vest.
- “Kickstands up” and “tail gunner” were associated with actual bike rides. “Kickstands up” refers to when a biker is pulling out, and the “tail gunner” is the biker who is at the end.

After implementing this instructional approach, students were able to connect these new vocabulary words to my dad’s vest. My goal was not to make sure that students used the new words, but rather to demonstrate that there was a specialized vocabulary for bikers. I reinforced this concept by subsequently facilitating group work among students. Within

each group, I provided a topic, such as “baseball,” “cheerleading,” and “technology.” Students then worked collaboratively in their groups to write down all of the words they knew that were associated with their topic. During this group activity, students were amazed to see all of the words that they knew.

Next, I distributed new composition books to each student and explained that we were creating vocabulary journals that consisted of three different sections. I led this process with my students as follows:

- Students created a personalized title page.
- Students wrote the phrase “Word Wall” on the next page and counted out 26 pages for this section. On the top of each page, students wrote each letter of the alphabet.
- Students wrote the word “Phrases” on the following page and counted out 10 pages for this section.
- Students labeled the final section as “Vocabulary.”

### **Word Wall Section**

The Word Wall section is used most frequently during vocabulary instruction. During this time, new vocabulary words were introduced using multiple modalities to enhance understandings related to each word (Gilakjani, 2012). Multiple modalities were addresses in the following manner:

- Visual: Students saw the word.
- Auditory: Students heard the spelling of the word.
- Kinesthetic: Students spelled the word in word wall section of their vocabulary journals on the corresponding letter page (e.g., “Erosion” would be written on the page labeled with an “E.”).

The following description further illustrates an example of how I addressed the Word Wall component of the journals during instruction. Prior to each daily lesson, I selected three

vocabulary words to focus upon: two words directly related to the concept under study and one word that I noticed students struggled with in their writing. I began instruction by writing one word at a time on the board. After I wrote a word, students found the correct letter in the Word Wall section of their vocabulary journals and wrote the word on the corresponding page. Together, we would then spell it aloud. Next, students stood up, and I facilitated an interactive spelling activity, such as a chant with body movements. Interactive spelling activities entailed saying each letter of the word using body movements that mimicked well-known motions, such as sports actions or dance moves, followed by saying the entire word with a different and related body movement. For example, if I used the basketball chant to spell the word “you,” I would pretend I was dribbling a basketball for each letter of the word (i.e., “y,” “o,” “u”) and then say the word “you” while pretending to shoot the ball.

### **Phrases Section**

After addressing the Word Wall section, I moved on to the Phrases section to focus on developing fluency with vocabulary words that students already know. For each word wall word, I created quick little phrases, such as the word “play” had the corresponding phrase “play in the yard.” As I introduced new phrases, students wrote them down in the Phrases section of their vocabulary journals in a list format. While the list of phrases was manageable, we read the phrases aloud together in different voices, such as a monster voice, opera voice, or whisper voice. As the list of phrases grew longer, I implemented games, such as the one-minute game to facilitate these repeated readings. With the one-minute game, students read the list of phrases in the Phrases section of their vocabulary journal as fast as they can and as many times as they can in one minute. For accountability purposes, students were required to hold their hand in the air and create a zero with their fingers before the timer was set to sixty seconds. Once the timer started, students read the list to themselves and changed their

fingers to show each time they completed a reading of the list. When the timer sounded, students shared with a peer the number of times that they read through the entire list of phrases.

### Vocabulary Section

The final piece of vocabulary instruction utilized the Vocabulary section in their vocabulary journals. This aspect of instruction focused on specific skills that were areas requiring improvement. The description below is an example from a lesson that focused upon a skill that I had previously identified as a problem area among my students: inferencing in relation to the traits and feelings of characters in a text.

I began this part of the lesson by writing a character trait, such as “shy,” on the board. Students wrote this word in the Vocabulary section of their vocabulary journals. I then asked students to talk with a peer for a few minutes about the meaning of this word. After this brief exchange, I shared a text with students that exemplified the word “shy” through a bashful character. Next, I facilitated a group discussion where students identified excerpts from the text that provided clues for the word “shy” and how the character exhibited this emotion through their dialogue, actions, and thoughts. As a class, we then created our own definition for “shy,” along with a matching emoji. Students included this class-created

definition and emoji next to the word in their vocabulary journals.

### Conclusion

This purpose of this chapter was to describe vocabulary journal activities used with 2nd grade students. The described approach, which was grounded in literature for best practices with vocabulary instruction (i.e., Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Beck et al., 2002; Gilakjani, 2012; Kamil & Hiebert, 2005; Stahl, 2005; Stahl & Kapinus, 2001), took approximately ten minutes per day and aligned with multiple state standards. Additionally, I noticed increased student motivation about vocabulary learning among my students.

Anecdotally, the vocabulary journal activities appear to have a positive impact on my students’ reading performance. In addition to noted improvement with reading fluency during small group instruction, I also noted improvements with reading fluency on numeric measures, such as with iStation data. For example, after one month of using this approach, iStation data revealed that the number of students who were reading fluently on grade levels increased by 41 percent. I look forward to continuing implementing vocabulary journal activities in my classroom in order to promote success with vocabulary instruction.

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