A Lesson on Mystery

By Holly McBride

Last year we set out to apply the four-step approach that we found in research from the University of Kentucky to design a unit for our language arts curriculum. We identified the appropriate standards, figured out what skills we would teach in conformance with the standards and what outcomes were expected, and we decided to develop a unit on the concept of "mystery." The instructional activities that we developed would center on the unit's culminating activity—a scavenger hunt. Here is how the unit unfolded.

1. Pre-Assessing

We began with a pre-assessment to determine what students already knew. We showed students several common images associated with mysteries (i.e., a magnifying glass, fingerprints, a picture of a detective), and we asked them to tell us what they knew about those images. We facilitated a group discussion that we documented using Writing with Symbols© software. This provided us with documentation of the students' knowledge before beginning the unit of study, as well as text that they could later read with the embedded picture support.

2. Pre-Teaching

We pre-taught essential vocabulary for the unit by creating picture-supported vocabulary handouts (see Figure 1) using Boardmaker© software and discussing the vocabulary as a group. We reviewed the vocabulary at the beginning of each class; students were expected to use the vocabulary daily, both in their writing and in their signing. This interactive process helped students develop a functional understanding and an appropriate application of each term. When a sign did not exist for some new vocabulary words, we rehearsed through repeated use of print, fingerspelling, and accompanying explanation or role playing of the concept.

3. Generating Excitement

We knew from experience that if we let students have a glimpse of the culminating project—in this case an in-school scavenger hunt—they would be better able to maintain motivation and attention for a longer period of time. We developed written clues and then videotaped the teacher reading the clues in American Sign Language. As the teacher read the clues, she modeled "thinking aloud" to develop a mental picture of the clue. The video showed her reading, thinking aloud, and following the clues to five different locations within the school. On one occasion, we included her making a mistake in order to show how she caught her own error and repaired it.

4. Teaching New Skills

We worked on learning the foundational skills that would be interwoven throughout the mystery unit. We focused heavily on visualization of text and scaffolded this experience using component skills outlined in the Visualize and Verbalize® program. We started with visualizing characters based upon word-level visualization and the use of drawings and/or acting and then increasing complexity over time:

- First, we gave the students a list of six to eight words describing a character's physical appearance and demeanor, and then we read aloud the list as a group to be sure that all of the words were recognized.

- Next, we asked students to draw a picture of the character that the vocabulary words described.

- Then we moved on to students creating their own word-level character descriptions. Each student had to come up with eight words to describe the character he or she had visualized and draw a picture of that character. Then each student had to give a partner his or her list of descriptive words (but not show his or her partner the drawing). The partner had to draw a picture of the character based on those descriptive words. Once this was done, the students showed each other their drawings and compared them.

Figure 1. Picture-supported vocabulary lists for our unit on mystery
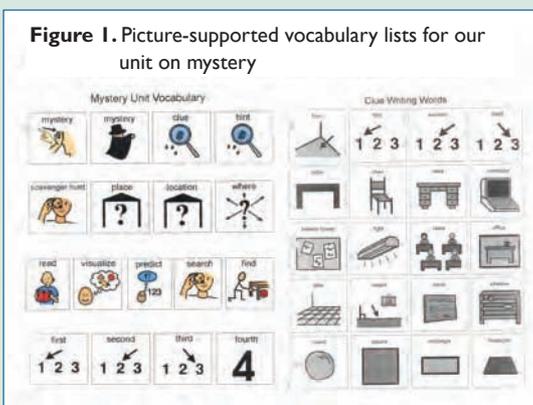
Through this independent work and comparison, we were able to see if all the words were taken into account in each drawing, and how visualizations of a given word might look the same or be interpreted with some range of difference. For example, "brown hair" might be dark or light, long or short.

After working on the word-level character visualizations, which were relatively concrete and easily drawn/acted out, we described and visualized locations. I composed a few simple three- to five-sentence paragraphs describing a location within the school. Using picture-supported vocabulary, the students helped each other read the paragraph "aloud." I then modeled a "thinking aloud" process to guess where the location could be.

After watching me think aloud, my students and I went to the presumed location and discussed whether or not the location fit all the criteria described in the clue. If it did not, we discussed other possibilities and why our assumptions were incorrect. Going to the physical location assisted the students with matching the visualization in their mind with an actual place. It was also easier to prove or disprove our guesses in the actual environment rather than relying upon memory of the place.
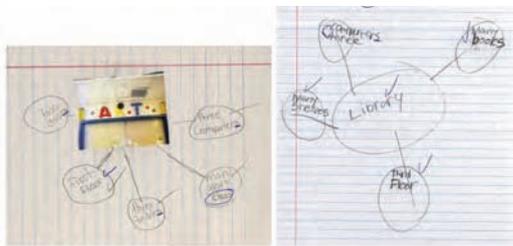
5. Trying It Out

Following a few days of visualizing environments based on reading written clues, students were ready to conduct their own scavenger hunts. Each student selected a peer's name to determine for whom he or she would create a scavenger hunt. Then students selected five locations in which to hide their clues and prize. At this point, a few students clearly understood the process of making a scavenger hunt, but others were still confused. Realizing a gap in understanding had occurred, I quickly developed a checklist of the steps involved in the process. This allowed students to develop greater independence and to work individually at their own pace. It also provided a way to track data regarding sight word recognition and ability to follow directions.

6. Mini-Lessons

At the beginning of class for several days, we worked on webbing, creating simple sentences,

Figure 2. Student-created webs to organize ideas for clue writing

and using editing. Each student selected his or her locations to describe; each took pictures of the locations and created a web (see Figure 2) to describe the location. Using the web, they composed simple sentences to describe the environment. We focused on two basic sentence types: "This place is _____" and "This place has _____" (see Figure 3). We also worked on subject-verb agreement, use of more varied adjectives, and editing for punctuation and capitalization.

Figure 3. Students practice sentences beginning "This place is…" and "This place has…"

This place is 2 floor.
This place has food.
This place has tiles blue.
This place has table.

This place has many books.
This place is 3 floor.
This place has carpet.
This place has shelves.

7. Individual Hunters

Finally the students began their scavenger hunt using picture-supported vocabulary to read aloud the clues. They were required to state the name of the place they believed the clue referred to and to explain why they thought it was the correct place before being allowed to move to the location.

8. Extending the Lesson

We extended learning by presenting an informal activity of signing clues to our middle school students (some with disabilities and some without) at the end of our lunch period. All the students enjoyed the activity. The structured classroom practice helped our students with significant disabilities keep up with their grade-level peers. The extension allowed a skill taught in one environment to be generalized to another and reviewed and practiced in an enjoyable way.

9. Reflecting

We were very pleased with the success of this unit. Students demonstrated a good understanding of the fundamental components of mystery, and they understood visualization and its connection to what a proficient reader does.

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