

Meeting Words Where They Live

By Carol Jago

Help Students
Enlarge Their Vocabulary
Through Reading

Teachers invest large swathes of classroom time to vocabulary instruction: defining words, drawing pictures of words, playing word games, reviewing words, quizzing students on words. The quizzes offer teachers twenty minutes of welcome peace while students tackle the task, are easy to grade, and fit tidily into an electronic grade book.

Parents are delighted to see their children studying lists of words. It feels like their version of school. Although all this focus on vocabulary is seemingly in accord with the push for college readiness, I worry that students are spending too much time with vocabulary activities and too little time learning words. Before declaring me a heretic, consider this: Most of the words you know weren't learned from a vocabulary list but from reading and speaking.

Students with robust vocabularies understand more of what they read, creating a "Matthew effect" whereby those who already have get more (Stanovich, 1986). Because comprehension comes more easily for students who know more words, they tend to read more. The more they read, the more competent they become at figuring out unfamiliar words. Although such students may be unable to define *cantankerous*, they would not be thrown for a loop by a passage such as the following:

In the restaurant, Maggie's aunt grumbled about everything, the food, the service, the price. She was the most cantankerous company imaginable.

The text surrounding *cantankerous* helps readers begin to build an understanding of the word. Clearly a single exposure is never adequate to learn a word as no one particular context is likely to entail a word's full meaning. The practice of meeting words where

they live, in real sentences, is a more authentic approach to learning vocabulary than simply memorizing a dictionary definition (Adams, 2010–2011). In my experience, even those students who correctly match *cantankerous* to *contentious*, *peevish* on Friday's quiz are unlikely to remember its meaning for long.

What will embed a new word in a student's long-term memory? Meeting it repeatedly as they read and speak in authentic conversations. With frequent exposures—which only happens when students read broadly and often—they develop a strong sense of what a word means. As Char Cobb and Camille Blachowicz explain in *No More "Look Up the List" Vocabulary Instruction*, keeping students busy with word activities "neither developed students' deep understanding of words nor communicated how word knowledge can give students power" (27). Nor does it help students sense the nuances that distinguish *cantankerous*, *contentious*, and *peevish*.

Teachers help students develop the habit of learning new words instinctively by inviting children to practice while they are being read to. My favorite example comes from Beatrix Potter's use of *soporific* in "The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies." The word appears three times in the text. In the first lines:

It is said that the effect of eating too much lettuce is "soporific."

I have never felt sleepy after eating lettuces; but then I am not a rabbit.

They certainly had a very soporific effect upon the Flopsy Bunnies!



Later in the story, the word is repeated:

The little rabbits smiled sweetly in their sleep under the shower of grass; they did not awake because the lettuce had been so soporific.

Rather than teaching long lists of words in an attempt to inoculate students from ever meeting a word they don't know, we need to expose students to literature that employs gorgeous language and ask questions that guide young readers to become adept at learning words as they read.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Building students' vocabulary implicitly through the close reading of complex texts doesn't obviate the need for explicit instruction. Students who are able to apply their knowledge of Greek and Latin roots and familiarity with affixes possess powerful tools for figuring out an unfamiliar word's meaning (Gansky, 2008). That said, simply requiring students to memorize long lists of roots and their definitions alone is unlikely to encourage the detective work the use of such clues invites. Teachers need to seize every opportunity a text or lesson offers for practice unpacking words.

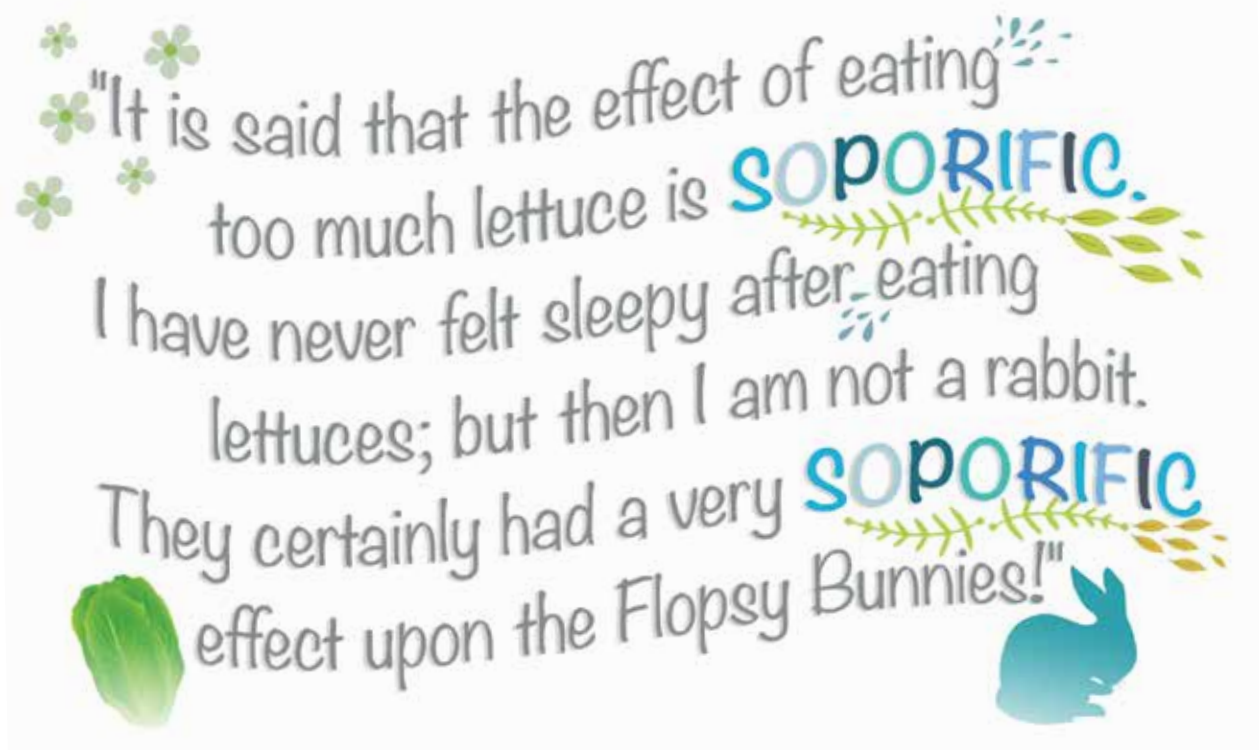
Let's take, for example, the word *inaudible*. Most students would know that *audio* is related to the reception or reproduction of sound. You might take a moment to contrast *audio* with *video*.

The prefix *in*—like its cousins *im* (*improbable*, *immeasurable*), *ir* (*irregular*, *irresponsible*), and *un* (*unlikely*, *unintentional*)—indicates the word's converse is the case (*inexpensive*, *indescribable*, *indefensible*), so a working definition of *inaudible* is “not audible or incapable of being heard.” Ideally, you want to make every unpacking of a word an opportunity for talking about how words work and an occasion for demonstrating the relationships between words.

Given the enormous number of words in the English language (the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains full entries for 171,476 words in current use), teachers need to choose carefully which words to teach (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan, 2002). Trying to preteach every word a child might not know before reading can, if one is not careful, take up more instructional time than the reading itself. That said, certain words, often nouns, sometimes need to be taught for students to make sense of the text. The first paragraph of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* offers a perfect example. Although the passage contains several words a child might not know (and one made-up word), the only critical word that a reader needs a definition for before reading is *mole*.

The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home. First with brooms, then with dusters; then on ladders and steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash; till he had dust in his throat and eyes, and splashes of whitewash all over his black fur, and an aching back and weary arms. Something up above was calling him imperiously, and he made for the steep little tunnel which answered in his case to the gravelled carriage-drive owned by animals whose residences are nearer to the sun and air. So he scraped and scratched and scabbled and scrooged, and then he scrooged again and scabbled and scratched and scraped, working busily with his little paws and muttering to himself, “Up we go! Up we go!”

Although students may not be familiar with the word *whitewash*, you might invite them to notice how Mole was standing on a ladder with a brush and pail of the stuff to spring-clean his house. These context clues along with pointing out the two parts of the word—*white* + *wash*—are probably all you need to do to establish a picture



of what is going on here. This kind of word study models for young readers what good readers do automatically.

Particularly challenging for English learners are words with multiple meanings. Although students may be familiar with the noun *bolt* and the idea of *bolting a door shut*, the intransitive use of the verb *bolted* meaning to make a sudden, swift dash might be puzzling. When you notice such usage, try to make a point of drawing students' attention to it in the course of discussion. Ask students to share examples of times when they *bolted* from a room. The note I try to strike with students is that learning about words is a lifelong project. Celebrate that you have discovered an additional use for a known word.

Not to play with the Kenneth Grahame's artful use of the sound of words borders on educational malpractice. "So he scraped and scratched and scabbled and scooged, and then he scooged again and scabbled and scratched and scraped, working busily with his little paws." Ask students what effect this description of Mole's actions with his paws had on their understanding of where he lived. Take a moment to act out what this might look like. Reflect on the order of the repeated words. Why all the alliteration and what in the world does *scooged* mean anyway? Grahame is playing with words. Play along.

Not All Words Are Created Equal

Bliethly skipping words you don't know is a recipe for reading comprehension disaster—unless you can be certain that the unfamiliar words are relatively unimportant to the text's overall meaning. For example, in a description of a bucolic woodland glade where an author regales you with a list of wildflowers, readers might choose to gloss over the meaning of *agrimony*, *baneberry*, and *gilly-weed*, as the overall picture is clear. Though such details are intentionally selected and some nuance will be lost, stopping to look up such words causes readers to lose momentum and possibly the thread without adding much to their comprehension of the whole.

Of course, everything depends upon the reader's purpose. If I pick up a book to identify the wildflowers in my garden, I am going to pay very careful attention to such details. Good readers have a sense of when a word is cardinal to understanding a passage and when it is not. I must confess that though I love Patrick O'Brian's *Master and Commander* series, I cannot be bothered to learn the vocabulary of nineteenth-century sailing ships. Every book contains a helpful diagram with parts clearly labeled: spanker boom, mizzen mast, futtock shrouds. I ignore the drawing and read right through every term, keeping my eye instead on the story of Captain Jack Aubry and his friend, the ship's surgeon and spy, Stephen Maturin. The purpose of my reading is pleasure, not nautical minutiae.

When instruction and assessment focus only on rarely used multisyllabic words, we frustrate students. Instead of fostering the love of word learning, we make them feel dumb. Recognizing the limitations of list-based memorization, the College Board is abandoning the testing of "SAT words" in its redesigned exam. The exam will no longer reward the recall of definitions for relatively obscure vocabulary, assessing instead the understanding of words in academic contexts. Students will have to meet words where they live, embedded in the kinds of readings they are likely to be assigned in college coursework.

Learning words is important for more than doing well on a test. The limits of students' language can define the borders of their thinking. Lack of vocabulary hamstringing their ability to express themselves. As the wordsmith Evelyn Waugh reminds us, "One's vocabulary needs constant fertilizing." Word study is an integral part of reading and writing; let's treat it as such.

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Carol Jago is a highly experienced middle and high school teacher, teaching English for over 32 years. Carol serves as an associate director of the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA,

and has been the president of the National Council of Teachers of English. Carol served as AP Literature content advisor for the College Board. Her Heinemann titles include *Beyond Standards*, *Cohesive Writing*, *Classics in the Classroom*, *Come to Class*, *Papers, Papers, Papers*, and *With Rigor for All*. Carol edits the journal of the California Association of Teachers of English, "California English," and has served on the planning committee for both the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework and the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework.

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