

VOCABULOGIC

Word Harvesting: Using Authentic Literature as the Source for Vocabulary Learning (Rasinski)

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Have you ever seen a writing rubric that doesn't include "word choice" as one of the criteria against which to assess the quality of students' writing? Word choice goes beyond students' writing. Published authors themselves, whether of adult or children's literature, choose interesting words to improve their writing. Thus it stands to reason that books, poetry, and other published materials that students read are likely filled with interesting words. As teachers we should take advantage of this treasure trove of words.

I had an old professor who was known for saying, "Teaching is the process of making visible that which is normally invisible." Teachers help students discover what is often hidden from their view. The words in literature are often hidden from the view of students. When students read or are read to by their teacher or parent, they are often so engrossed in the story that they do not recognize the wonderful words that the author has used to craft her story. The words are essentially invisible to the students. Even in stories for young children, readers can find rich words woven into the texts. Take, for example, the opening pages to William Steig's (1969) classic *Sylvester and Magic Pebble*. Sylvester Duncan lived with his mother and father at Acorn Road in Oatsdale. One of his hobbies was collecting pebbles of unusual shape and color.

On a rainy Saturday during vacation he found a quite extraordinary one. It was flaming red, shiny, and perfectly round, like a marble. As he was studying this remarkable pebble, he began to shiver, probably from excitement, and the rain felt cold on his back. "I wish it would stop raining," he said.

To his great surprise, the rain stopped. It didn't stop gradually as rains usually do. It ceased!

Although intended primarily for children in their early childhood years, this excerpt containing a mere 95 words includes the following words: *pebbles, extraordinary, remarkable, gradually, ceased*. Indeed, Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) report that 1.6% of the words found in books for preschoolers and 3.1% of the words in books for the elementary grades are rare, words that are not normally used in conversation. Comparably, 1.7% of the words uttered in conversations of college graduates are rare words. Now, I am not trying to suggest that adult college graduates converse at the level of a preschool book; rather, the point I make is that literature, even for preschoolers, contains a rich corpus of words worth learning – both for reading and for writing. If students encounter unusual and interesting words in reading literature, clearly it is to their benefit to know these words in order to more fully understand what they read. Additionally, since authors purposefully choose interesting, tier 2 (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) words for their writing, students will improve their own writing when they choose to use such interesting words. The question, then, becomes, how can teachers take advantage of the interesting words found in the books and other literature that children read? Word harvesting is one way.

Word harvesting is a simple method to help make these fabulous words found in trade books, poetry, song lyrics, and written texts more visible to students. In word harvesting, students along with the teacher select words they think are interesting from authentic texts that students are reading or have had read to them. Because students choose the words, they have ownership of the words. A good place to start word harvesting is to incorporate it into the daily classroom read aloud.

Steps involved in word harvesting during read aloud:

- 1) The teacher reads an authentic piece of literature to students daily. Prior to reading to students the teacher asks students to enjoy the story but also to listen for any interesting words that the author may have used. Students may jot down the words on a piece of scratch paper.

2) At the end of the read aloud teacher and students spend a few minutes talking about the story. The teacher also asks students to call out the interesting words that they may have heard read by the teacher.

3) The teacher writes the words on a sheet of chart paper (Read Aloud Word Wall) displayed in a prominent place in the classroom. The teacher may also add a word of her own choosing. Students may also be asked to write the words in their own personal word journals. As the teacher writes the words she may elaborate on the meanings of the words, provide synonyms, and/or use the words in exemplar sentences. The class should aim for choosing five to ten words from each read aloud session.

4) Think of the Read Aloud Word Wall as a kind of billboard or advertisement for the words – inviting students to read and use the words. Thus, over the course of the next several days the class (teacher and students) make a purposeful effort to use the words from the Read Aloud Word Wall in their oral and written language. Because many of the words are not normally used in students' normal oral language, the teacher should take the lead in using the words in her own language. Words on the word wall can also be read chorally by the class over the next several days.

5) On subsequent days, the same routine is followed during and after the read aloud. With each read aloud session, a new word wall chart is put on display, making visible for students the words used by the author to help make his or her writing even better.

The beauty of word harvesting is that it is such a simple activity that can easily be fit into an already existing classroom activity --- reading aloud. Word harvesting can also occur when students read a poem chorally or sing a song as group (e.g. I recently sang *Grand Old Flag* by George M. Cohan with a group of primary grade students. We harvested *grand, acquaintance, boast, brag, peace, and emblem*). The number of words that can be harvested and learned over the course of a year is nothing short of staggering. If a teacher reads to her students and harvests 5-10 words daily over the course of a 180 day school year, she can expect her students to be exposed to 800-1,600 words -- words that authors have used to craft their texts.

Students can also harvest words individually during their own personal reading. These words can be posted into their own personal word journals. Selected students can be invited to add a word or two from

their own reading to the classroom word wall.

Second grade teacher Cheryl McBride (Rasinski, Fawcett, Lems, & Ackland, 2010) employs word harvesting with an interesting twist. While group reading *Chicken Sunday* (Polacco, 1992) her students added the following words to their word wall: *solemn, intricate, solo, and splendid*. Students read the word wall regularly in Cheryl's class. However, she added something else to motivate them to actually use the words in their everyday speech. Each day she puts a hotel call bell on a different student's desk. Whenever the assigned "bell dinger" hears one of the word wall words in classroom conversation he or she rings the bell. "Not only were students listening for the words to see if the "bell dinger" would catch it, they were intentionally using the words so that the bell would ring" (Rasinski, Fawcett, Lems, & Ackland, 2010, p. 50). Cheryl adds, "What impressed me most was, all of a sudden, they were looking at the word wall... With very little effort on my part, they are trying to use words in conversation. They're always listening" (Rasinski, Fawcett, Lems, & Ackland, 2010, p. 50-51). During a recent district benchmark testing, the bell was put into Cheryl's drawer. Throughout the testing period she could hear students softly making a "ding" sound as they encountered previously harvested words that were now part of their vocabulary. With the use of authentic texts and a hotel call bell, Cheryl has been able to make previously invisible words visible to her students.

Students are more likely to learn words when they are given a chance to choose the words they wish to learn. Moreover, students are more likely to appreciate well written texts when they are able to see that published authors improve their writing through their choice of words in their writing. Word harvesting is one way to help make visible to students the wonderful words authors use to craft their texts and to encourage students to make those words their own.

References

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- See more at: <http://vocablog-pic.blogspot.com/2011/11/word-harvesting-using-authentic.html#sthash.NKFOBIt0.dpuf>