

Vocabulary's Influence on Successful Writing. ERIC Digest D157.

There is extensive research indicating that a rich *vocabulary* is a critical element of reading ability. Laflamme (1997) states that recent research has identified *vocabulary* knowledge as the single most important factor in reading comprehension. There is, likewise, no shortage of studies documenting a strong link between reading and writing. "Reading and writing are two analogous and complementary processes in that both involve generating ideas, organizing ideas into a logical order, drafting them a number of times to achieve cohesion, and revising the ideas as is appropriate" (Laflamme, 1997, p. 373). The processes are so closely aligned that some researchers even advocate teaching reading and writing simultaneously, rather than as two separate subjects (Laflamme, 1997).

If the writing process is inextricably linked to the reading process, and the reading process is heavily dependent upon *vocabulary*, it naturally follows that the writing process is likewise dependent. This digest will explore some of the ways *vocabulary* influences writing ability, and how teachers can use *vocabulary development* specifically to improve writing skills.

VOCABULARY AND WRITING: FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

In some ways, the ability to write effectively hinges upon having an adequate *vocabulary* even more than does the ability to read. Once students have learned to decode words, they may be able to read and pronounce many words that are unfamiliar to them. They may even be able to determine accurate meanings of unfamiliar words simply by examining the context in which those words are used. During the writing process, however, a student does not have the luxury of examining the context in which a word is used; he or she is creating the context. Therefore, the writer must be able to spontaneously recall words that are known not only by sight, but that are understood well enough to use correctly. "Mayher and Brause (1986) have stated that writing is dependent upon the ability to draw upon words to describe an event" (Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet, 1989, p. 18).

The breadth and depth of a student's *vocabulary* will have a direct influence upon the descriptiveness, accuracy, and quality of his or her writing. As Ediger (1999) notes, "variety in selecting words to convey accurate meanings is necessary in speaking and writing, the outgoes of the language arts" (p. 1). Corona, Spangenberg, and Venet (1998) concur: "At any level, written communication is more effective when a depth of *vocabulary* and command of language is evident" (p.26).

PRINCIPLES OF VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Because words are the writer's most important tools, *vocabulary development* must be an important and ongoing part of classroom learning. Laflamme (1997) offers several key

principles that should guide the creation and implementation of a comprehensive *vocabulary development* program.

1. Teachers must offer direct instruction of techniques or procedures for developing a broad and varied *vocabulary*. This instruction can be provided both formally through the language arts program, and informally through various classroom interactions-such as story time-with students.
2. New *vocabulary* terms must be connected to students' previous knowledge and experiences. If students are unable to contextualize new words by attaching them to words and concepts they already understand, the words will likely have little meaning to them. And as Ediger (1999) points out, "if meaning is lacking, the chances are pupils will memorize terms and concepts for testing purposes only or largely" (p. 2).
3. Students should be able to contextualize the *vocabulary* terms they have learned and use them in society (Ediger, 1999, p. 7). In order for students to do this successfully, they must first learn to become comfortable using these words in the classroom. Students should be required or encouraged to incorporate new *vocabulary* terms into their oral and written reports and presentations.
4. Practice and repetition are important methods by which students can become familiar with new words and understand how they may be used correctly (Laflamme, 1997). Students should be frequently exposed to the same words through practice exercises, classroom use, and testing.
5. Teachers should model an enthusiasm for and curiosity about new words through their own behaviors and attitudes. Teachers who are enthusiastic about *vocabulary development* will automatically look for "teachable moments" throughout the day, pointing out interesting words as they crop up in texts, stories, or conversation; asking students to explore alternative ways of expressing concepts; and helping identify colorful, descriptive ways of speaking and writing.
6. Schools, teachers, and students must be committed to *vocabulary development* over the long term. The teaching of *vocabulary* must be an interdisciplinary project, integrated into the curriculum at every level.

USING *VOCABULARY* TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

While improved *vocabulary* can enhance students' writing skills, there is no guarantee that it will do so automatically. Improvement in *vocabulary* will result in improved writing skills only if the teacher is able to create a classroom that takes writing seriously. "In such a classroom, process and environment are closely intertwined and interdependent. The process does not come alive unless the environment is conducive to it" (Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet, 1998, p. 24). The following are techniques teachers can use to create a writing-centered classroom.

1. Sharing *vocabulary*-rich literature. Sloan (1996) explains that in her quest to help her students become better writers, she "went to the best source for teaching good writing: good books" (p. 268). By having students read (or reading aloud to them) books, poems, and stories that contain interesting *vocabulary*, teachers can both introduce new words and provide a forum for discussing them.

2. Helping students become aware of and look for interesting words. There are many different forms this can take. For example, students could pair up and look through books for words that catch their attention, then write down common words that the author could have used instead. Other methods include having students: write words they encounter on an "Interesting Word Wall" (Sloan, 1996. P. 268); create a word bank through words-of-the-day that are taken from classroom literature (Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet, 1998, p. 25); record or act out energetic verbs; or write unfamiliar words in "literature-response journals" for later exploration (Manning, 1999, p. 3).

3. Offering a variety of writing opportunities. "A writer-centered classroom emphasizes using written expression to communicate ideas. Writing is an important part of all areas of the curriculum" (Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet, 1998, p. 29). The authors go on to note that students have a greater investment in their writing when they are given choices about their assignments. Such choices may include journal or diary entries, weekly logs summarizing journal entries, book reports, outlines, poetry, autobiographies, short stories, or any number of variations on the above.

4. Providing ample time for students to fully experience the writing process (Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet, 1998). The teaching of writing should be approached as a process that must be studied in depth, and substantial blocks of time should be devoted to writing.

5. Allowing students to conference with teachers and fellow students (Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet, 1998). When writing topics are chosen, students should meet with their teacher to discuss ideas and answer questions. The teacher's role is to encourage, build on existing strengths, and help the student expand his or her abilities. Conferencing with fellow students gives the budding writer the opportunity to share ideas, brainstorm, and rework his or her project.

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