

# “Tweaking Practice”: Modifying Read-Alouds to Enhance Content Vocabulary Learning in Grade 1

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A significant body of research suggests that wide differences in concept and vocabulary knowledge exacerbate the achievement “gap” that we see in so many schools, especially schools with large numbers of children of poverty (Hart & Risley, 1995). Educators sometimes talk about “The Matthew Effect,” the sad reality that a child with a well developed prior knowledge will learn new content in the same domain more easily than classmates with a smaller fund of knowledge (Stanovich, 1986). It has been suggested (Hirsch, 1988; Yopp & Yopp, 2006) that this effect is especially significant in relation to content area vocabulary—not knowing what *circle* is makes it more difficult for a student to understand and learn new terms like *diameter*, *radius* and *circumference*. Learners need “anchor” concepts and vocabulary to learn new words which are then connected to the concepts they already know.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Read-Alouds and Vocabulary Development*

Reading aloud to students has been examined as an important curricular practice to positively affect vocabulary learning (Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Sometimes referred to as shared storybook reading, read-alouds are productive means for giving students opportunities to develop new vocabulary. A recent survey of teacher practices (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004) concluded that reading aloud to students is a common and well regarded practice in early elementary classrooms. Over 93% of primary teachers surveyed indicated they used read-alouds and 91% of them recommended the practice to parents. Because children’s books present more advanced, less familiar vocabulary than everyday speech (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998), listening to books being read helps students go beyond their existing oral vocabularies by presenting them with advanced concepts and vocabulary. Discussion after shared storybook reading also gives students opportunities to use new vocabulary in the more decontextualized setting of a book discussion (Snow, 1991).

Numerous studies have documented the fact that young students can learn word meanings both incidentally and purposively from read-aloud experiences (Eller, Pappas, & Brown, 1988; Elley, 1989; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). De Temple and Snow (2003) draw the contrast between talk around shared storybook reading that is cognitively challenging and talk that is not. There has been substantial research on the nature and effects of storybook reading in both home and school settings which support their view and suggest ways in which read-alouds can maximize student vocabulary learning (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Involving students in discussions during and after listening to a book can produce significant word learning, especially when the teacher scaffolds this learning by asking questions, adding information or prompting

students to describe what they heard. Whitehurst and his associates (Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Crone, & Fischel, 1994; Whitehurst, Zevenberg, Crone, Schultz, Velting, & Fischel, 1999) have called this process "dialogic reading."

Research also suggests that this scaffolding may be more essential to those students who are less likely to learn new vocabulary easily. Children with less rich initial vocabularies are less likely to learn new vocabulary incidentally and need a thoughtful, well designed, scaffolded approach to maximize learning from shared storybook reading (Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Senechal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995).

So the research points to book teacher read-alouds with scaffolding as a positive way to develop the oral vocabularies of young learners.

### *Engagement and Learning*

Besides the impact of teacher scaffolding, the role of active learning in vocabulary development has been well established. Students who engage with words by hearing them, using them, manipulating them semantically and playing with them are more likely to learn and retain new vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2001; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Further, relating new words to what is already known creates elaborated schemata and links between concepts that provide for enduring learning (Anderson & Nagy, 1991).

A series of studies by Senechal and her colleagues (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Senechal & Cornell, 1993; Sénéchal, et al., 1995) found that young children's engagement and active participation in storybook reading was more productive for vocabulary learning in storybook read-alouds than passive listening even to the most dramatic "performance" of book reading. This has been confirmed by a growing number of recent studies that have scaffolded young students' learning by focusing their attention on target words and engaging students in interactive discussion about books using specific vocabulary before, during, and after reading (Brett, Rothlein, & Hurley, 1996; Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Wasik & Bond, 2001). So the activity of the learners is an important component of learning from read-alouds.

Use of the senses, particularly visualization, is an important activity for both engagement and for focusing attention in learning. Sensory representation helps learners connect with new information and provides alternative codes for understanding and retention (Paivio, 1971; Sadoski, Goetz, Kealy, & Paivio, 1997). Classic, seminal work on concept mapping (Johnson, Pittelman, Toms-Bronowski, & Levin, 1984) has been extended to current strategies such as concept muraling (Farris & Downey, 2004) which represents words and their relations to a topic in a semantically organized graphic. All of these studies attest to the enduring power of visualization in word learning. Our goal was to structure a scaffolded read-aloud activity that called on students to be active in their learning. These processes would also be employed not with the typical storybook reading materials but with informational materials designed for young learners.

### *The Importance of Informational Literature and Early Learning*

Informational literature is a rich source of new vocabulary and concepts. Non-fiction books not only present students with new vocabulary that will be essential for further learning, they also provide them familiarity with text structures that proliferate in the later grades. Further, read-alouds of informational books stimulate thinking and discussion that help develop higher-order

comprehension strategies. Lastly, when combined in thematic informational text sets, these books provide the necessary repetition and use in multiple contexts that results in durable word learning.

Despite all this potential benefit, informational materials make up a small part of the corpus of selections (12-14%) in commercial reading materials frequently used for classroom instruction (Hoffman, McCarthy, Abbott, Christian, Corman, et al., 1994; Moss & Newton, 2002). Similarly, surveys of literacy educators revealed that less than 7% of materials selected by literacy educators for instruction are informational. The picture is similar when examining the titles teachers use for read-alouds (Yopp & Yopp, 2006) where less than 15% of materials used were of an informational variety. Both of these lines of research suggest that increasing informational read-alouds of thematically connected texts may have a beneficial effect on vocabulary learning.

### *The Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether small adaptations of the read-aloud process already established in primary classrooms could have a significant effect on the content vocabulary learning of young students. The goal was to develop a model of “tweaking” existing read-aloud practices that was both easy to use and effective in first-grade classrooms and could be carried out in the context of in-school professional development. Therefore, the study also interviewed teachers using the processes to find their reactions to the enhanced read-alouds and their perceptions of its applicability to practice.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### *Design*

Each teacher used two classroom read-alouds employing each of the read aloud strategies, the standard read aloud and the Vocabulary Visit read aloud (See Table 2). The only additions to the standard read aloud were the use of First Write for the pre-test and Final Write for the post-test. Therefore, in each classroom, the design was:

1. Pre-Assessment. First Write of all the words the students could generate related to the topic under study. Ten minutes were allowed for this write and all students were finished before this time.

2. Use of the Read Aloud (RA) or Vocabulary Visits(VV) Procedure. For the purpose of the study, three read-aloud sessions were scheduled each week for twenty minutes each. A unit of four books ran for three weeks. Any extra time remaining in each twenty-minute session was used to allow students to select and read books and to write in their reading logs in both conditions.

3. Final Write at the end of each three week unit. Students were asked to write all the words they could now relate to the topic without any access to word charts or books. Ten minutes were allowed for this write and all students were finished before this time. Each class participated in both a Vocabulary Visit and Standard Read-Aloud condition and text sets were counterbalanced across conditions. Both conditions used the same sets of books to control for repetition within the materials. Lastly, teachers were interviewed after the completion of the student data collection.

*Participants and Setting.* Teacher participants were drawn from a pool of twelve first-grade teachers who volunteered to use the Vocabulary Visits process and to be interviewed after using

it. Four teachers were randomly selected as classroom cases. All teachers were native speakers of English, tenured in their districts, two with master’s degrees and two enrolled in master’s programs, and were rated as good teachers by their cooperating reading coaches. The schools in which they taught were in a multi-ethnic district (43% black, 42% white, 10% Hispanic, 4% Asian and Pacific Islanders, and 1% other). The school district as a whole has 35% free lunch students, but the schools in which the data were collected ranged from 40-61% free and reduced lunch.

Student participants in the four case study classrooms were 54 first graders (29 boys; 25 girls) of mixed ethnicity and ability in heterogeneous reading groups. Each group contained students on, above, or below grade level as indicated by the Developmental Reading Analysis (Beaver, 1997), which was used for student benchmarking at regular points during the school year.

*Materials.* Materials selected were two text sets consisting of four books each (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Books Used for Thematic Text Sets in the Order They Were Presented

Theme	Books
Recycling	Marx, D. (2001). <i>Earth Day</i> (Rookie Read-About Holidays). Chicago: Children’s Press. Gibbons, G. (1996). <i>Recycle! A Handbook for Kids</i> . New York: Little, Brown. Robinson, F. (1996). <i>Too Much Trash</i> (Rookie Read-About Science). Chicago: Children’s Press. Showers, P. (1994). <i>Where Does the Garbage Go?</i> New York: Harper Collins.
Plants	Jordan, H. (1992). <i>How a Seed Grows</i> . New York: Harper Collins. Robbins, K. (1990). <i>A Flower Grows</i> . New York: Dial. McMillan, B. (2002). <i>A Harvest of Color: Growing a Vegetable Garden</i> . New York: Handprint Publishers. Levenson, G. (1999). <i>Pumpkin Circle: The Story of a Garden</i> . Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

One set was on the topic of *plants* and the other on the topic of *recycling and the environment*. Each text set contained one very easy book at a primer level, two first-grade books of increasing difficulty, and one harder book at an end of first-grade or early second-grade level. For each topic, a thematic poster to stimulate discussion was constructed of pictures related to the topic or selected from appropriate charts already in the school. The charts were constructed or selected because of their ability to stimulate discussion on the topic at hand. Two sets of training materials were also used for professional development, to be discussed later, on the topics of *weather* and the *human body*. The topics were chosen to be consistent with local and national social studies and science standards for first grade.

When the books were used for the Vocabulary Visit process, 10-15 words were chosen from each text set by the teachers who were using the text set. The selection of vocabulary words from information text by teachers shows a high degree of consistency (Beyersdorfer, 1991) and in this case all teachers agreed on the words selected. Further, each word selected (e.g., *recycling* in the recycling unit and *life-cycle* in the plant unit) occurred a minimum of five times in natural text over the course of the text set.

*Instructional Procedure*

Table 2 summarizes the two read-aloud approaches along with the Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment processes. The first column summarizes the characteristics of a standard practice read-aloud (RA) as detailed by Fisher et al. (2004) in their survey of teacher practices. These were procedures consistent with those used by the teachers when observed in their classrooms prior to the study. The second column summarizes the read-aloud process called “Vocabulary Visits” (VV) (Blachowicz & Obrochta, 2005) which includes modifications, or tweaking, of the standard process. Both read-aloud conditions typically involve teacher selection of appropriate material, preparation for reading by the teacher, setting of purpose for students, listening to fluent oral reading, discussion and writing.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Read-Aloud and Vocabulary Visit Approaches with Inserted Study Procedural Notes

<b>Standard” Read Aloud Process (RA)</b>	<b>“Tweak” -Vocabulary Visit (VV)</b>
Teacher text selection of individual books	Teacher selection of informational text set
<i>MATERIALS: In the study, both sets of teachers were presented with pre-selected text sets.</i>	<i>MATERIALS: In the study, both sets of teachers were presented with pre-selected text sets.</i>
Teacher preview of the text and practice	Teacher preview and practice of texts, including selection of 10-15 key vocabulary items across the text set
<i>PRE-ASSESSMENT: In this study, both sets of teachers have students begin by listing all the words they associated with the topic.</i>	<i>PRE-ASSESSMENT: In this study, both sets of teachers have students begin by listing all the words they associated with the topic.</i>
Picture walk to activate prior knowledge	Introduction of the topic and “First Write” as a knowledge scan and activation of prior knowledge
Establishing a purpose for listening related to content of selection	Establishing of purpose of listening as learning about the topic and listening for key vocabulary
	Group talk: Before reading, students “visit” the visual and generate some key vocabulary which is posted on chart.
Students listen to text with teacher modeling fluent and expressive oral reading. No attempt made to define or teach target or other words.	Students listen to text with teacher modeling fluent and expressive oral reading, using “thumbs up” and “stops” to discuss ideas and vocabulary and record vocabulary on chart which remains up for the duration of the theme.
Further discussion as appropriate	Further discussion as appropriate
	Semantic sorting activity
Independent reading and writing about the topic to fill out the 20 minutes of allocated time	Independent reading and writing about the topic to fill out the 20 minutes of allocated time
<i>POST-ASSESSMENT: Final Write</i>	<i>POST-ASSESSMENT: Final Write</i>

In the Standard Read Aloud process, teachers select a book, do a picture walk or other introduction to activate prior knowledge, read fluently to the students and follow up the reading with discussion to establish comprehension. There is no attempt to identify or give definitions for the target or other words. Follow-up activities include journaling and writing about the selection as well as art and other activities. Vocabulary does not receive special preparation or follow-up. This was the process that the teachers in our study felt aptly described the ways in which they carried out read-alouds, commonly with favorite fictional storybooks.

The Vocabulary Visits model "tweaks" this process in several ways. First of all, informational texts are selected in sets to provide for repetition of vocabulary and concepts. In the preparation stage, 10-15 vocabulary words from each text were selected for emphasis by the team of teachers. The selection of vocabulary words from information text by teachers shows a high degree of consistency (Beyersdorfer, 1991) and in this case all teachers agreed on the words selected.

For prior knowledge activation, students are presented with the topic of the text set and asked to generate and write an individual list of words they already know about the topic before the reading begins. The topic is presented with only a brief introduction: "Today we are going to start reading about plants. Think about plants and write down all the words you can think of that might be in a book about plants." This is the students' "First Write" and serves as both a rough estimate of the student's prior knowledge about the topic and as the untimed pre-assessment for the unit.

After the First Write, Vocabulary Visits begins with Group Talk. Students meet on the rug and the teacher uses the poster along with the first question: "What do you see in this picture?" As students contribute words related to what they see or think, the teacher records their contributions by putting Post-Its on the poster. In this process the teacher's job is to scaffold and mediate as needed by supporting student learning in at least three ways: with requests for physical response ("Touch your skull."), questions ("What is a skull for?"), explanations ("A skull protects your brain.") or extension of word meaning ("Do you know any other words related to skull?" e.g., cranium). Other senses are called into play as well. For example, the teacher asked, "What sounds might you make when you get hurt?" and "What are some words for how you feel when you hurt your body?" After 5-10 minutes, there are usually quite a number of words on the chart which the students have now heard, seen, discussed, and sometimes dramatized.

During the reading of the book, students in the Vocabulary Visit (VV) condition are also called upon to make physical responses. We use the "thumbs up" procedure to encourage active listening. Student put their thumbs up when they hear one of the new words. Sometimes the teacher stops or rereads a sentence when no thumbs go up for a critical term, but the goal is to have a fairly normal reading experience, not one with constant interruptions.

After the reading, the students discuss what they learned and, in the VV condition, add a few new words to the chart. In the course of this and prior discussion, students use the words individually in their responses with teacher feedback. In some cases, definitions or synonyms are presented by the students; in other cases, as with target vocabulary, definitions and defining information are presented by the teacher, if they have not already been presented by a student, as she encourages discussion of these words. At the end of each session, students turn to a partner and each discusses his “favorite” word of the day.

Also, for the VV condition, a semantic sorting activity is included as a follow-up both as a group and as an individual activity. These are simple sorts working from the posted words to categorize words in some meaningful way. For example, for the plant unit, one sort was types of plants - what you might see in a garden; and what you might hear in a garden. As a follow-up, in both conditions, books are put in a central location for reading during independent reading time and students are asked to read at least one of the books each week and record it in their reading logs. Students are encouraged to write about what they read as well in their writing journals. These activities rounded out the twenty minutes devoted to each session.

At the end of the entire text set sequence, all students prepare a final list of all the words they know related to the topic. This is called Final Write in the VV process and serves as a post-assessment. No charts are visible during this process.

#### *Teacher Preparation*

This study was conducted within the context of teacher staff development in the participating district. The district only allows instructional research to take place in the context of improving the capacity of its teachers. After initial discussions and observations of their read aloud processes using the first sets of books, they then studied the Vocabulary Visit process and saw it modeled by the reading coach on a weather unit. They then tried the process with the human body unit and had a chance to ask questions to clarify the process. This training took place over a three-week period. During the study, each teacher was observed once by the reading coach and took part in weekly debriefing and question-and-answer sessions. Table 2 summarizes the way in which the procedure for this study formalized the Read-Aloud and Vocabulary Visits processes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A preliminary analysis of covariance looking at post-test scores by class, condition and text was done just to get the “lay of the land” of results. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for each class, condition, and text set.

As expected, students in both conditions learned new words. Combining conditions across classrooms, there was a significant effect for condition favoring the VV group ( $F(3,101)=21.932$ ,

**Table 3.** Means and Standard Deviations on Pre-Test, Post-Test, and Gains on Content Vocabulary for Read Aloud (RA) and Vocabulary Visits (VV) Treatments

Class/Model	Story	Measure	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Gain
1 RA	Plants	Mean	8.5833	13.9167	5.3333
		N	12	12	—
		SD	4.56186	5.61586	3.31205
1 VV	Environ.	Mean	6.8333	17.2500	10.4167
		N	12	12	—
		SD	3.27062	7.30037	5.10718
2 RA	Environ.	Mean	8.5714	15.2857	6.7143
		N	14	14	—
		SD	2.92770	6.24412	4.56456
2 VV	Plants	Mean	10.7143	22.4286	11.7143
		N	14	14	—
		SD	5.41264	9.07841	5.79693
3 RA	Environ.	Mean	8.9375	16.5625	7.6250
		N	16	16	—
		SD	4.86441	7.81425	4.41022
3 VV	Plants	Mean	13.4667	24.0000	10.5333
		N	15	15	—
		SD	8.50938	12.51285	5.86596
4 RA	Plants	Mean	8.3000	13.7000	5.4000
		N	10	10	—
		SD	4.90011	6.18331	3.53396
4 VV	Environ.	Mean	6.8333	17.2500	10.4167
		N	12	12	—
		SD	3.27062	7.30037	5.10718

Note. RA = standard read-aloud model. VV = Vocabulary Visits model. SD = standard deviation.

$p < .0001$ ) with no significant effect or interaction for either topic or class (VV group:  $M = 21$ ,  $SD = 9.73$ ; RA group:  $M = 15$ ,  $SD = 6.54$ ). Analyses of pre-assessment scores show that all students knew more about *plants* than they did about *recycling/environment* before beginning the read-aloud sequence. This was true whether in the cases of the plant topic being used for Standard Read-Aloud or Vocabulary Visits. Therefore, gain score data were used for a second analysis, a repeated measures analysis.

The multivariate repeated measures analyses indicated that the VV group had significantly greater gains in vocabulary words learned than did the Standard Read-Aloud (RA) group (Wilks' Lambda, Error  $df = 50$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Consistent with earlier research on vocabulary learning from read-alouds (Yopp & Yopp, 2006), students who knew the most about a topic before hearing the texts read aloud, as measured by the words know in First Write, made greater gains than those with less prior knowledge (Pearson Correlation =  $.290$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Students rated as average or above average

reading level on the DRA (Beaver, 1997) also made greater gains than those at the lowest reading level, but the gains favored the VV process at all reading levels. Thus, the Vocabulary Visit process enhanced the ability of primary students to build relational sets of content vocabulary.

### *Teacher Perceptions*

At the completion of the study, the participating teachers were interviewed about their perceptions and comments about both approaches to reading aloud and the resultant student gains. Responses of the teachers to the interview questions were summarized and analyzed by two researchers using the method of constant comparison focusing on inductive, cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990). Inter-rater reliability was .88; all differences in coding were resolved before final analysis. The data revealed five categories of observations related to 1) facets of the process that the teachers felt produced increased word learning; 2) issues related to engagement of learners; 3) issues related to scaffolding; 4) issues related to the practicality of the process and the likeliness of its use; and 5) issues related to enrichment and “stretch.”

With respect to the greater gains made by their students in the Vocabulary Visits condition, teachers observed both the greater learning and the greater engagement of their students well before the results were reported and felt the results matched their observations. They expressed a new realization of the opportunity these text sets offered for repetition of vocabulary and the examination of words in multiple contexts. They also commented on the First Write and the need to frontload a bit more awareness of topic and to return to that topic with vocabulary and concepts to build a larger conceptual set. The use of the First Write sheet allowed them to remember to do this consciously but without a lot of prior preparation. They felt the pupil word list writing and illustration helped to “cement the topic” in the minds of the students and made them more aware of the ways in which the words were connected.

With respect to engagement, the teachers recognized the important role of student activity in learning. Personalizing of the topic with illustrations, the “thumbs up” process, and the posting and manipulating of words on the chart were all ideas that they considered useful for more active, less passive vocabulary work. A less anticipated but more commented upon learning was the teacher’s appreciation for the thematic, poster-based word collections. They commented that these meaning-focused word walls complemented the phonics and sight word-based word walls that were so evident in primary classrooms.

One teacher noted that her students would go back and consult the poster word walls and that her students even added to the posters later in the year when they came across an appropriate plant or environment word. She noted, “These were actually ‘living’ word walls and I, and the kids, used them and loved them and loved watching them grow.” They noted that this process gave them dynamic ways to use word walls and attended to the dissatisfaction so many of them felt with their own understanding and use of word walls for instruction.

One complicated issue was their recognition of the power of scaffolding, recognizing its contribution to word learning, but being loath to use it during the reading of familiar, favorite storybooks. One teacher noted, “I just love pulling down my old favorite books and reading them. I would not want to interrupt them with specific attention to vocabulary.” A second complicating factor was the perennial issue of time—many teachers noted that read-alouds were often simple time fillers and required no preparation or forethought. However, most were willing to consider changing their practice in content areas, the same teacher continuing, “...but I am going to make sure I do some reading in science and social studies and find books that repeat those words. They just soaked them up! And they kept using them!”

In response to the question of whether or not the teachers would use the process again, all of the respondents said they definitely would use the entire process or use aspects of it. One common comment was their appreciation of the text sets and posters. Several of the teachers noted that having the materials and posters provided for them would influence their use of thematic sets of materials. As first-grade teachers, they were concerned about the lack of time to deal with social studies and science for their students and felt that the combination of read-alouds, vocabulary, and content areas was a powerful time saver as well as a powerful instructional approach.

Lastly, one recurring comment was how the students grasped and enjoyed using so many words which usually would not be encountered in the first-grade curriculum. This had also been noted by faculty outside the classrooms who, after the weather training unit, asked, "Where in the heck did all these kids learn 'cumulonimbus'?" The idea of stretching their children by surrounding them with difficult words in a context that allowed them to connect them to what they already knew was recognized and appreciated. One of the reading specialists working in the school found a quote that summed up what many of the teachers observed about the importance of supported challenge: "Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88).

The results of this study suggest that all read-alouds are beneficial to young children but using scaffolded read-alouds can provide an intellectual environment for improved content vocabulary learning of young children. Further, they suggest that such models using thematic text sets and processes focusing on engagement also provide teachers with practical instructional strategies for the classroom which build upon, rather than conflict with, the practices they already use and value.

## AUTHORS' NOTE

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