The Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy: Using Student Interest and World Knowledge to Enhance Vocabulary Growth
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The vocabulary self-collection strategy: Using student interest and world knowledge to enhance vocabulary growth

Martha Rapp Haggard

Because vocabulary development is an important component in reading comprehension and other areas of academic performance, instructional designs place much emphasis on practices which provide direct, explicit experience with words in the context of comprehension and content instruction (Betts, 1956; Herber, 1978; Johnson and Pearson, 1984). Three major forms of vocabulary instruction are typical.

1. General vocabulary development is usually associated with secondary English classrooms where preselected lists of words are studied weekly. Instructional goals often include spelling competency, and the case could be made that spelling instruction in the elementary school is a form of general vocabulary development.

2. Basal reading vocabulary development is built into elementary reading instruction following the guidelines established by Betts in the Directed Reading Activity (1946). Selected words from a story are pretaught to develop concepts and increase comprehension and are reviewed during discussion and extension activities.

3. Content area vocabulary development, in both elementary and secondary classrooms, is intended to teach the language and concepts associated with a given topic. Clarification and refinement of concepts is emphasized. Instruction may or may not occur prior to reading, and targeted words make up some, if not a major portion, of end-of-unit tests.

Traditionally, for all three types of vo-
vocabulary instruction, words chosen for study are determined by teacher selection from publisher or curriculum committee generated word lists; instruction relies heavily on teacher presentation of words followed by dictionary or workbook assignments.

This article will describe an alternative approach, the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS), which differs significantly from traditional instruction through its use of student generated word lists and its emphasis on students' personal experience and world knowledge. The VSS may be used for general, basal reading, or content area vocabulary development. Guidelines for all three settings will be presented, along with a recent study on the effect of VSS instruction. In addition, criteria for evaluating vocabulary instruction (Ruddell, this JR issue) will be applied to the VSS approach to assess its usefulness from a theoretical perspective.

General vocabulary development
The Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (Haggard, 1982) begins with an assignment for each student and the teacher to bring to class a word that he or she believes the entire class should learn. Students are encouraged to find words in their own environment and to determine the meaning as best they can from context; they do not have to look the words up prior to presentation in class.

On the day of presentation, students and teacher write their words on the board and take turns identifying their word and telling (1) where each word was found, (2) the context-derived definition, and (3) why they think the class should learn the word. During this time the teacher leads discussion for the purpose of clarifying and extending word meanings; other students and the teacher add information they have about each word to arrive at an agreed-upon definition. This definition may then be compared to a dictionary definition if that seems desirable.

Following discussion, the list is narrowed down to an approximate number of words by eliminating duplications, words most of the class already know, or words the students do not wish to learn. Final list words are redefined as students record words and definitions in their vocabulary journals. Words eliminated from the class list may be entered on personal lists, as students wish. Study assignments may be made at this time, or the teacher may use the class list to develop activities for assignment the next day. At the end of the week, students are tested on the class word list according to instructional goals (spelling requirements, definitions, use in sentences, etc.). On the next day, the cycle begins again.

Basal reading vocabulary development
VSS is readily adaptable to basal reading instruction; however, since it is designed to follow, rather than precede, story reading, an important instructional principle must be kept in mind: Students must be reading in a basal text that is well within their instructional reading range; if not, words critical to story comprehension should be pre-taught in the traditional manner. The two adaptations of VSS described below are designed for small group instruction.

- Open choice vocabulary self-collection. Following reading and discussion of the story, students are asked to go back to the story and find one word they believe the group should study or learn more about (the teacher also identifies one word). As the words are
nominated for the group list, the teacher records the words on a chalkboard or easel board; each student gives the context definition and his/her reasons for wanting to learn more about the word. Group discussion allows other students to add information as students relate meaning both to personal experience and story events. After all words have been nominated, the group agrees upon a final list.

Extension activities may be drawn from suggestions available in the teacher guide or student workbooks when words on the students' list overlap those identified in the Guide. Workbook activities should be assigned selectively so that students complete only those concerned with the words from their list. Additional assignments using teacher designed activities may be made the following day for words not covered by published materials.

- **Limited choice vocabulary self collection.** VSS may be adapted for use with a preselected list of words and set of activities. Using the words identified in the teacher guide or a list taken from the story, the teacher prepares, in advance, activities for teaching or extending concepts associated with each word. These activities may be taken directly from the basal teacher guide or adapted. Students, working as a group or individually, decide which of the words are to be studied, discuss reasons for their choices, and complete the activities.

**Content area vocabulary development**

Vocabulary self-collection in the content areas occurs following the assigned reading (Haggard, 1985), as it does in basal reading instruction. It differs from the basal reading instruction in two important ways. First, the primary purpose here is to learn content; student attention, therefore, should be directed toward locating words and terms which will assist them in acquiring content knowledge. Second, content instruction generally occurs in whole class settings; to use time efficiently and achieve maximum student participation, identification of words should occur first in two or three member teams. This has the benefit of allowing discussion of words and word meanings prior to their nomination for class consideration.

Student teams are asked to nominate one word or term that team members believe is important for learning the lesson content. The teacher also nominates a word. These words are written on the chalkboard, defined, and discussed in the manner already described. After the final list has been established, the words are incorporated into unit study materials and activities, and are tested as they apply to content information. The cycle begins again when a new unit of instruction is introduced.

Figure 1 summarizes the steps for implementing vocabulary self-collection for general, basal reading, and content area vocabulary instruction.

**Vocabulary self-collection research**

VSS incorporates two features which differ from traditional instruction: use of student-generated (as opposed to preselected) word lists, and emphasis on student experience and world knowledge. Recent research has suggested the importance of student experience on word learning (Duffelmeyer, 1977; Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, and Pittelman, 1981); however, relatively little information is available concerning the effect of instruction which emphasizes student generated word lists. A
Steps for implementing the vocabulary self-collection strategy for general, basal reading, and content area vocabulary instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General vocabulary instruction</th>
<th>Basal reading instruction</th>
<th>Content area reading instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students bring to class one word they believe the class should learn. Teacher brings one word.</td>
<td>Students identify one word they believe the group should learn. Teacher identifies one word.</td>
<td>Student teams identify a word or term important for learning content information. Teacher identifies one word/term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students write words on chalkboard and give definitions as best they can from context.</td>
<td>Teacher writes words on chalkboard as students give definitions from context.</td>
<td>Teacher writes words on chalkboard as teams give definitions from context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class members add any information they can to each definition.</td>
<td>Teacher and students consult references for definitions that are incomplete or unclear. Final definitions are derived.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students and teacher narrow list to predetermine number for final class list.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students record class list with agreed-upon definitions in vocabulary journals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Students record any additional words on personal vocabulary lists.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class list words are used in followup study activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Words are tested according to instructional goals.</td>
<td>Words become part of extension activities or end-of-unit tests.</td>
<td>Words/terms are tested as they apply to content information.</td>
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</table>

A recent study examined just the variable of vocabulary self-collection. To do this, a modified VSS was used in which no instruction took place; students were asked to log their vocabulary development as it occurred. In addition, university students were chosen as study subjects to allow for reflection and self-analysis of word learning. The study focused on the following aspects of word learning: (1) motivating factors, (2) source of new words, (3) strategies for learning, and (4) metalinguistic awareness.

Forty-two university students taking their first course in reading methods were asked to log their vocabulary development for 6 weeks. Journals were provided in which students were to record (1) each word learned (by date), (2) the definition as perceived, (3) how the definition was obtained (e.g., context, dictionary, explanation), (4) where the word was found (e.g., reading,
course lecture, conversation), and (5) why the word was learned. At the end of the 6 weeks, students wrote a one-page analysis of their own vocabulary development. Instructions prior to the study emphasized that students were to record only those words learned, rather than all new words encountered, that they were to record “no new words today,” when appropriate, and that there was no requirement for words to be looked up in the dictionary.

Student responses
A total of 1,456 words were recorded by the 42 students; of these, 1,403 were available for analysis. The range of words collected as 5-99, with a mean of 35, median of 34, and three modes of 30, 34, and 42 (each mode occurred three times). Log entries were analyzed under the categories of motivation for learning new words (why the word was learned), source of new vocabulary words (reading vs. non-reading, course related vs. not course related), and strategy for word learning (context, dictionary, direct instruction, structural analysis). Written analyses submitted by the students were used to derive conclusions regarding their metalinguistic awareness of word learning.

- **Motivation for learning new words.** Six categories of motivating factors emerged from the student responses; these categories, the percent of occurrence, and sample comments are summarized below:

  - **Sound, 9%:** “I liked the sound of this word.” “It sounded delicious!”
  - **Interesting/unusual word, 7%:** “Interesting word.” “Unusual spelling.”
  - **Curiosity, 7%:** “I was curious about this word.” “Curious.”
  - **Immediate usefulness, 30%:** “I wanted to impress my husband. He’s always slinging big words around.” “I needed the word to pass the final.” “We were discussing this in class.” “I needed [this word] to understand a conversation about opera.”
  - **Clarification, 26%:** “I’d seen [or heard] it lots of times, but I didn’t know what it meant.” “I thought I knew the meaning, but I wasn’t sure.”
  - **New word, 20%:** “I’d never seen or heard this word before.”

Analysis of these responses indicates a strong effect for internal motivation and affect on word learning. Sound, interesting/unusual words, and curiosity, combined, account for 24% of all words learned. In immediate usefulness, the most frequent and seemingly the most utilitarian category, responses were affective in nature and suggest internal motivation: Students learned those words for which they had perceived a need to know, whether it was for impressing one’s husband, passing a final exam, or participating in a conversation with friends. No responses indicated purely external factors (e.g., “I had to learn it for a test”); rather, responses were in terms of need or desire (“I needed to know,” “I wanted to learn”).

Internal motivation, in the form of individual choice, appeared in the clarification responses, virtually all of which were like the two samples shown. Students apparently chose, at some critical moment, to gain clear understanding of a word which they had encountered repeatedly for an indeterminate period of time. Here again, internal rather than external factors appear to be the most salient; one student reported that it was “inconvenient for me to continue not knowing” a word that was frequently used in class.

- **Source of new vocabulary.** Reading and nonreading sources of new vocabulary, and their percent frequencies, are summarized in Figure 2.
the pleasure/information reading category, magazines and newspapers were most frequently mentioned; few responses mentioned novels or other fiction. The Other category included predominantly television watching and conversations with children. Overall, reading accounted for 59% of the new words learned; nonreading language encounters accounted for the remaining 41%.

Reanalysis of these data reveals that 40% of the new words learned were course related (21%, reading; 19%, mentioned in class and direct instruction); 60% noncourse related (38% reading; 23%, peer use and other).

The most unexpected result here is the emergence of pleasure/informational reading as the most frequent source of new vocabulary. This is particularly surprising in light of the fact that the study subjects were all enrolled in an intensive program in elementary education. It suggests, yet again, that internal, rather than external, factors influenced learning.

- **Strategy for word learning.** Strategies for learning new words were derived from classification of students' responses to how they learned each word and from commentary in the one-page written analyses: 42% of the words were looked up in the dictionary, 36% were learned through context, 16% from unsolicited explanation, 6% by asking someone for meaning, and 1% though structural analysis. Many students indicated that they used the dictionary to check their "best guess" about meaning or because of the assignment to log their vocabulary development (even though they were told this was not required). Two students

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looked all new words up in the dictionary. Overall, dictionary use and context were the two most frequently used approaches; individually, students tended to use a personalized, systematic approach for most words learned.

- Metalinguistic awareness. Analysis of student commentaries revealed two major findings. First, students reported in substantial numbers that they learned words most easily when those words labeled or defined their own experience. Comments ranged from “I need to connect new words with something I already know” to indications that words were learned best if they had “intense or significant meaning” or the student felt “exceptional personal interest.” Several students tested themselves at intervals during the 6 week period. All reported surprise at the number of meanings retained, and all commented that the words for which they had greatest experience or “connection” were the ones most easily remembered.

Second, student self-analyses indicated a general attitude of playfulness and enjoyment in word learning. All but two students expressed strong enthusiasm and interest in the project; the two who did not were the ones who misinterpreted the assignment and looked every word up in the dictionary—their evaluations were scathing. The others began playing with words “‘scrofulous’—a wonderful mouthful.” “‘Raspy’ just says it all!” Comments ranged from “I’m going to do this the rest of my life!” to “I knew I’d had my head either in a kitchen drawer or on an 8-year-old level for too many years. Oh the joys of college and learning new words.” Clearly, for these students, the very act of collecting words increased sensitivity to new words and interest in word learning.

Internal motivation and effects

From the results of this study, the following five conclusions may be drawn:

1. Internal motivation exerts a strong influence on vocabulary acquisition and development,
2. Written text is a major source for new words and terms,
3. Adults develop systematic, personalized strategies for word learning,
4. Words which label or define experience are learned more quickly and easily than those which do not,
5. The act of collecting words increases sensitivity to new words and enjoyment in word learning.

These conclusions provide strong support for the use of the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy in the classroom, particularly in light of the absence of instruction during the study. With instruction, one would expect even richer results. Such instruction allows student interests to be the primary focus of vocabulary learning. Words students bring to class are drawn from all areas of their lives: popular books, current issues, various content fields, fads, and people/places/things in the news. Over time, these lists become a compilation of student experience.

Basal reading and content area VSS demonstrate clearly to students that certain words in text are worth further study, either because they are critical to understanding, because they are useful in learning content, or because they are inherently novel or appealing. Students are encouraged in VSS to develop personalized strategies for learning new words and are explicitly not bound to the dictionary-first approach. And finally, VSS stimulates animated discussion, playfulness, and serious debate over words and word meanings as students nominate and select increasingly difficult words to learn.
Application of instructional criteria to VSS

Further evidence of the effectiveness of VSS can be found from a theoretical perspective. Using an interactive model of the reading process (Ruddell and Speaker, 1985), Ruddell suggests criteria for evaluating vocabulary instruction (this JR issue) which focuses on four major components of learning episodes: (1) reader environment, (2) knowledge utilization and control, (3) declarative and procedural knowledge, and (4) reader product. These criteria are applied to VSS in the discussion below.

- **Reader environment.** Experiential background and prior knowledge (criteria 2 and 4) are the basis for discussion about words in VSS; that is, discussion begins with what the nominating student already knows about a word, and continues as other students and the teacher add information from their own knowledge bases. In the course of this discussion, the teacher has opportunity to find out what students know and do not know about a given topic. An interesting phenomenon of VSS is the amount of personal experience students choose to share with one another. Teachers and students alike come to know each other in a decidedly different way. This type of discussion stimulates not only teacher-student interaction (3), but student-student interaction as well. The instructional product (5) and student expectations (6) are defined clearly through establishment of a class list and clarification of test outcomes.

- **Knowledge utilization and control.** Criteria 3 and 4 (developing awareness of what is known and the ability to hold tentative hypotheses about word meanings) are particular strengths of VSS. Each week, as students actively search for new words to nominate for the class list, they become more and more sensitive to the pool of unknown words available in their environment. Often, students report finding new words in materials they had already read before, or comment that they had not known so many new words were “out there!” This sensitivity is cumulative; the more experience students have looking for words, the more aware they become of the possibilities.

Class discussion is critical to developing students’ ability to revise original definitions based upon new information. As students and the teacher add information from their experience to the proposed definition, shared and differing interpretations are explored. Through this process, students encounter multiple meanings, nuance, and context bound meanings which require refinement and at times a shift from original perceptions.

- **Declarative and procedural knowledge.** Attention to pronunciation (criteria 1 and 2) occurs naturally and easily during preliminary discussion of the words being nominated for the final list. During this time, discussion is relaxed and open (after all, the list is not “official” yet); when mispronunciations do occur, they stimulate instruction centering around pronunciation and syllabication rules, exceptions, and higher order rules (e.g., *supreme/supremacy*). As discussed previously, word meanings begin with students’ prior knowledge and associations (3) and are refined through combined knowledge and experiences of the group. Through its approach to word definition—getting a gist or preliminary meaning through context; adding information in group discussion; checking, refining, or clarifying meaning in reference books when needed—VSS pro-

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vides a model strategy for word learning (4) that is highly useful and easily acquired. 

- Reader product. All of the criteria for reader product are met by the Vocabulary Self-Collection strategy. Of particular importance here is the attitude students develop about word learning and formal vocabulary study (3). Because the process begins with them and their own experience, because it all seems so easy, and because they have such a strong voice in the content of instruction, students really like VSS. Teachers find that their biggest problem is limiting discussion to allow time for other areas of study; students independently pursue information and new words beyond the dictates of class assignments. This, it would seem, is the point of vocabulary instruction: to stimulate enthusiasm about word learning, and to develop independent learners.

Final comments

The Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy is one of many ways to teach word learning. It differs significantly from other approaches, however, by its emphasis on student choice in deciding what words are to be studied, and student experience as the basis for determining word meaning. The importance of these features is perhaps best captured by a statement from one student reflecting on her own vocabulary development and projecting herself into the role of teacher: “It is fine for us as teachers to present children with new words and hope, even expect, them to learn the words; it is better for us to allow them to learn their own words as we encourage their appreciation for their language [and] as we show enthusiasm for what is meaningful to them.”

Evidence from classroom practice, research, and theory suggests that the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy is an effective instructional alternative. It stimulates interest and enthusiasm, builds upon and expands word knowledge, and establishes independent learning behaviors. These instructional features are critical in developing students who are active, enthusiastic word learners.

References


Most popular trend

The most popular trend in North American education is to teach thinking skills.

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