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Developing Word Consciousness

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Word consciousness *refers to the knowledge and dispositions necessary for students to learn, appreciate, and effectively use words. Word consciousness involves several types of metalinguistic awareness, including sensitivity to word parts and word order. In this chapter, we focus on the need for students to be aware of differences between conversational and written language, and of the pervasive power of word choice as a communicative tool in the latter. Specific activities for promoting word consciousness developed by a team of upper elementary teachers are described. We argue that word consciousness is not just a tool for the appreciation of literature or for effective writing but is essential for vocabulary growth and for comprehending the language of schooling.*

To effectively promote vocabulary growth, teachers not only must aim to help students learn specific words (although this is often an important goal) but also must develop vocabulary knowledge that is *genuine*—that is, knowledge and dispositions that will transfer to and enhance students' learning of other words as well. One part of generative vocabulary knowledge is word-learning strategies, which are discussed in Part II (Chapters 6–10) of this book [*Vocabulary Instruction: Research to Practice*, edited by James F. Baumann and Edward J. Kame'enui]. In this chapter, we focus on a different aspect of generative word knowledge, word consciousness, and on one aspect of word consciousness in particular—an awareness of the difference between the conversational and written registers, and the powerful role that word choice plays in the latter. Later in the chapter, we provide examples of specific ways that teachers can promote word consciousness in their classrooms.

Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as one of five essential components of reading in recent federal documents (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; NICHD Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000). Although teaching specific words is one important component of promoting vocabulary growth, one cannot teach students all of the words that they need to learn. Hence, as Baumann, Kame'enui, and Ash (2003) point out, teaching specific words is only one of three important instructional objectives in a comprehensive program of vocabulary instruction. The other two objectives are to "teach students to learn words independently" and to "help students to develop an appreciation for words and to experience enjoyment and satisfaction in their use" (p. 778). In recent papers, Graves and his colleagues (Graves, 2000; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002) have advocated a four-part vocabulary program: wide reading, teaching individual words, teaching word learning strategies, and fostering word consciousness.

Although word consciousness can be thought of as one component of a vocabulary curriculum (Graves, 2000), the word component may suggest a compartmentalization that is not intended. We are not suggesting that word consciousness should be added as one of several different kinds of vocabulary activities, but rather that teachers need to take word consciousness into account throughout each and every day. Although developing an appreciation for words is among the most intangible of all goals in vocabulary learning (Graves, 1987), this goal is critical for both the development of conscious control over language use and the ability to negotiate the social language of schooling.

What Is Word Consciousness?

Word consciousness can be defined as interest in and awareness of words (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002). Despite the apparent simplicity of this definition, it is probably best to conceptualize word consciousness as a cluster of rather diverse types of knowledge and skills.

Word Consciousness as Metalinguistic Awareness

Word consciousness is first of all a type of *metalinguistic awareness*, that is, the ability to reflect on and manipulate units of language—in this case, words. However, one can make further distinctions in the types of metalinguistic awareness that contribute to word consciousness.

Most basic may be the concept of *word* as a term referring to identifiable units in written and spoken language. Teachers in primary grades should not assume that their students have a complete understanding of this basic term. Roberts (1992) described the gradual development of this concept in kindergarten, first-, and second-grade children, finding that students' tacit knowledge of this concept remained ahead of their ability to explain it.

There are several specific types of metalinguistic awareness that may contribute to word consciousness. One is *morphological awareness*:

awareness of word parts and how they contribute to the overall meaning of a word. Anglin's (1993) findings suggest that morphological awareness makes an important contribution to vocabulary growth—most obviously, to the explosive increase between first and fifth grade in the number of prefixed and suffixed words that children can explain.

Syntactic awareness is the ability to reflect on and manipulate the order of words in a sentence. It can be tested, for example, by a sentence anagram task, asking students to reassemble scrambled words back into a meaningful sentence. One way syntactic awareness may contribute to vocabulary growth is through its contribution to the process of inferring the meanings of new words from context. For example, a different set of words would fit in the blank in *He saw the* _____ *car* versus *He saw the car* _____. The errors of children who fail to successfully infer the correct meaning of a word in context often show a disregard for the syntactic structure of the sentence (McKeown, 1985; Werner & Kaplan, 1952).

Similarly, syntactic awareness seems to contribute to the successful use of definitions. The errors of children who fail to correctly use information in a definition often show a disregard for the structure of the definition (Miller & Gildea, 1987; Scott & Nagy, 1997).

Though *metasemantic awareness* is not a commonly used term, it should also be clear that children's ability to reflect on the meanings of words also contributes to their vocabulary knowledge and use. Knowledge of terms such as *antonym* and *synonym* is part of word consciousness, as is the ability to deal with *figurative language* and *metaphor.*

Knowledge and Beliefs About Word Learning

Word consciousness also involves knowledge and beliefs about word learning, and the various instructional practices and tools used to achieve it. That is, one can ask "What is it that teachers and students should know about word learning?" We believe that the following should be included

in such a list (see Nagy & Scott, 2000, for a more complete discussion of these points):

- Word knowledge is complex: Knowing a word is more than knowing a definition.
- World learning is incremental: It is a process that involves many small steps.
- Words are heterogeneous: Different kinds of words require different learning strategies.
- Definitions, context, and word parts can each supply important information about the meaning of a word, but each of these sources has significant limitations.

Furthermore, there are general principles of learning that have important implications for vocabulary instruction. To take a very specific example, there is a substantial body of research showing that distributed practice is more effective than massed practice for learning vocabulary, at least when it involves memorizing definitions (Willingham, 2002).

Knowledge about the nature and use of definitions is also important to vocabulary learning. Children's ability to produce definitions in conventional form shows substantial growth between kindergarten and fourth grade (Watson & Olson, 1987), but even sixth grade children's ability to understand definitions of novel words is limited in certain ways (Scott & Nagy, 1997). Fischer (1990, 1994) suggests that one reason that high school foreign language students make ineffective use of bilingual dictionaries is an overly simplistic concept of definition—that is, they simply look for cross-language synonyms. On a more positive note, Schwartz and Raphael (1985) reported benefits in word learning when students used a graphic organizer that restructured definitional information.

Word Consciousness and the Difference Between Spoken and Written English

So far we have presented word consciousness as a multifaceted and rather complex topic.

However, we believe that there is one aspect of word consciousness that is fundamental: helping students become aware of the differences between spoken and written English and, in particular, the role that precision of word choice plays in effective writing.

In every language, there are multiple *registers*—levels or styles of usage appropriate to different situations, topics, and audiences. Although there are a variety of registers in both written and spoken English, for the purpose of this chapter, we will focus on the differences between the oral language typical of face-to-face conversation and the written language typical of books. The difference in modality (the fact that the former is spoken and the latter written) is only one of the differences between these two registers; there also are differences in vocabulary, in syntax, in the purposes for which language is used, and in the tools used to accomplish these purposes. Snow (1994) argued that the difference in modality is not the only difficulty facing children learning to read and in fact that learning to decode is far less of a problem than learning to cope with the differences in the way that the oral and written registers are used.

One of the important ways that oral and written language differ is in terms of their vocabulary. Written language typically uses a far richer vocabulary than oral language (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). However, this difference is not because writers tend to have larger vocabularies than talkers; rather, it has to do with how oral and written language are used, and what constitutes effective communication in each. In particular, it has to do with the different role of word choice in these two registers.

Precise choice of words is not an essential skill in conversation. Careful word choice can play a role in some types of oral language, for example, in storytelling. In conversation, however, there are simply too many other factors that are more important, or at least more easily available. One can use prosody (pitch, stress, and phrasing), gesture, and facial expression to nuance the meaning of a word. In conversation, one must have strategies for getting and holding the floor, and these strategies are not dependent on the precision of word choice. In conversation,

communicative effectiveness depends heavily on making use of shared beliefs, knowledge, and experiences. "You know who" can say more than a detailed description. The demands of producing and understanding speech at a relatively rapid rate also discourage the use of uncommon words (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1987).

Written language, on the other hand, is typically decontextualized. That is, when one is reading a novel, for example, there is less information offered by the context than there is when one is engaged in a conversation with a friend. The author obviously cannot point to objects in the readers' physical context and use words such as *this* or *that*. Nor can the author use gestures, facial expressions, or intonation. Nor can the author make detailed assumptions about what knowledge he or she might share with the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). Communication is, therefore, much more dependent upon the language itself, and one of the primary linguistic tools used by writers is precision in their choice of words. In writing, therefore, unlike in conversation, word choice is one of the most important, if not the most important, tool for expressive power.

Children are familiar with the rules of conversation, but even if they have learned the mechanics of reading and writing, they are not necessarily familiar with how decontextualized language functions. They have to be initiatied into the pragmatics of written language—how it is used to effectively accomplish communicative purposes—as well as the mechanics (Snow, 1994). If children do not understand the communicative power of precise word choice, it is hard to see how they will come to understand the distinctions in meanings among related words or be motivated to learn words. Written language is an arena in which vocabulary is the currency, but you have to know that if you are going to make the effort to invest in it.

Word Consciousness and Motivation

We have already suggested that understanding the difference between written and oral language and the expressive power of word choice in written language are foundational to word consciousness. They are also fundamental in terms of motivation. Learning words can be viewed as valuable if you know what to do with them and if you know how to use them as tools.

One key principle of motivation is success. Students are unlikely to enjoy a task that they cannot perform adequately. On the other hand, being able to perform a task successfully is itself a powerful motivator. Thus, scaffolding students' success is an important factor in effective instruction.

Language, including vocabulary, is at least as emotionally laden as any other part of the curriculum. Making a linguistic error, for example, a spelling error, can be humiliating. Not knowing what a word means or using a word incorrectly can also pose a serious risk. Learning the literate register is learning a new dialect of English, and dialect differences are also associated with very visceral reactions.

How does a teacher create an environment in which it is possible for a student to take linguistic risks and in which students can achieve a level of success high enough to motivate them to continue taking these risks? In the remainder of this chapter, we give some examples.

Promoting Word Consciousness in the Classroom

In this section, we describe activities developed during a 7-year, teacher research project called The Gift of Words (Henry et al., 1999; Scott, Asselin, Henry, & Butler, 1997; Scott, Blackstone, et al., 1996; Scott, Butler, & Asselin, 1996; Scott & Wells, 1998; Skobel, 1998). In this project, we found that teachers could influence word consciousness in their students, including the perceptions that students have about the use of words with an academic or literate tone, by providing an enriched focus on word use during reading, writing, and discussions.

The underpinning of the project was the work of Vygotsky, as developing conscious awareness and control of language was one of his

central themes (Minick, 1987). Vygotsky (1978) also provided the foundation for understanding teacher and student interactions as mediated assistance, which facilitates students' learning and motivation. In this process, teachers help children become consciously aware of their use of oral and written language by controlling instruction strategically to focus attention on different aspects of reading and writing. Instruction is also mediated in that the teacher creates future contexts in which children can consciously apply what they are learning in new ways (Moll & Whitmore, 1993). In vocabulary acquisition, as in all aspects of learning, it is essential for students to be actively engaged in and to take increasing responsibility for their own learning.

Teaching Word Consciousness and Generative Knowledge of Words

The Gift of Words project grew out of the collaborative experiences and ideas from a core group of practicing elementary teachers and university participants who met and worked together for 7 years. As teachers invested time and energy in word learning strategically throughout the day, their students began to use words differently. The vocabulary-group teachers were able to develop students' willingness to experiment with words and to risk using them in new ways (Scott, Butler, & Asselin, 1996, 1997; Skobel, 1998). One teacher articulated a general agreement that she would "lay any money down that there isn't a single kid in my class...that isn't more aware of words" (Henry et al., 1999, p. 264). Another veteran teacher agreed, saying, "Without question, the kids were excited about words in a way that, in my teaching, I have never seen before. And, it's not that I have ignored words before; it is just that this year, [the focus] was major" (Henry et al., 1999, p. 264).
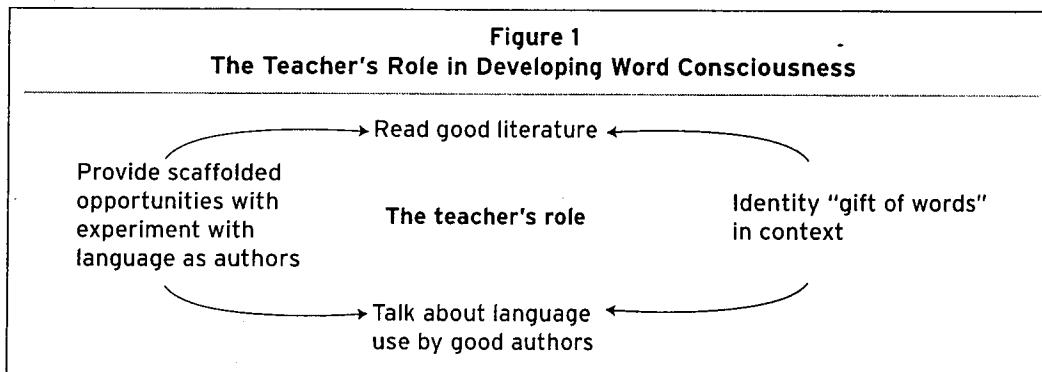
The vocabulary-group teachers chose to focus explorations with vocabulary learning in different curricular areas. A focus on vocabulary within literature circles has been described elsewhere (Scott & Wells, 1998). Four other teachers looked at vocabulary development that occurred in the context of writing. Precise understanding

of words is not necessary in many situations during reading. It's relatively easy to skip over a word when you're reading. It's much more difficult to skip a word in writing, and in writing the use of different words or phrases can create a different register or tone. The motivation for learning and using words is enhanced when children are trying to express themselves in writing because they are trying to communicate with others. In writing word choice is an important tool because students are trying to convey specific thoughts or ideas to amuse their audience or to describe a setting, a character, or a chain of events. We saw word consciousness developing out of the perceived need to use words well.

Reading and writing are reciprocal processes, and modeling has been shown to be an effective instructional strategy for each. The underlying tenet of the program was that modeling word consciousness with a focus on language use in general, as opposed to a particular set of words, will help students develop a mind-set for learning to pay attention to words.

The Gift of Words project was based on the premises that (1) students need to learn to value words in order to spend time and energy trying to learn them; and (2) both wide reading and direct instruction are important. Through wide reading, children are exposed to a variety of words and word usage. Through direct instruction and discussion, students can become more conscious of specific words, learn how these words fit with other words, and deepen their knowledge or morphology and syntax. The teachers used words encountered in stories and poems as the text for instruction to model conscious attention to language. In the development of word consciousness, they used the instructional cycle shown in Figure 1.

Well-written novels and poems provided the foundation for the project. Emerging writers need to study master writers, just as emerging musicians and artists study the masters in their fields. Introducing well-crafted text with rich use of vocabulary allowed students to internalize how various authors used words and provided models that could be critiqued and analyzed.

Figure 1
The Teacher's Role in Developing Word Consciousness

Provide scaffolded opportunities with experiment with language as authors → Read good literature ← Identity "gift of words" in context

The teacher's role

→ Talk about language use by good authors ←

Any piece of good literature will work, but some authors paint pictures with words more aptly than others. Our teachers started by using Newbery Medal books, Children's Choices, and other novels by renowned authors such as Katherine Paterson, Avi, Jack London, Jerry Spinelli, Lois Lowry, Karen Cushman, Natalie Babbitt, and Paul Fleischman.

Books and poems read aloud to the classes became a way to analyze word use together. The following phrases, for example, were identified as Gifts of Words: the prhases the author used to paint a particularly vivid picture or a descriptive phrase that added texture and tone to the writing.

- "joy jiggling inside..." *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977, p. 101)
- "The house felt as lifeless as a tomb." *The Half-A-Moon Inn* (Fleischman, 1980, p. 10)
- "His long chin faded into an apologetic beard." *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975, p. 17)

The Gifts of Words phrases provided the opportunity to talk about meaning and analyze word choice. The words were not necessarily difficult or academic in tone, but attention to metaphors, similes, and descriptive language created an entry point for discussion about word meaning and word use. For instance, the teacher could relate *apologetic* to the known word *apology*, talk about noun and adjective forms, and ask students how a *beard* could be *apologetic*.

Talk About Language Use by Good Authors.
An important aspect of any teaching is to take the implicit and make it explicit for students. Talking, for instance, about why you, the teacher, like a particular phrase or how the words in a good lead sentence grabbed your attention provides the metacognitive link between an author's word choice and the response of the reader. A teacher can discuss how authors make comparisons and build a sense of character in their books. The attention given to the way words are used by experienced authors can foster attention to language use in students' writing and the purposeful exploration of words.

Provide Scaffolded Opportunities to Experiment With Language as Authors.
Scaffolded opportunities occur when a teacher or a more competent person helps students by giving them support when they need it and taking it away as they become more capable independent learners (Bruner, 1986; Diaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1990). The teachers provided different sets of scaffolded opportunities for their students. However, in all the classrooms, students started their explorations by borrowing phrases from the authors they were reading and inserting them in their own writing.

Bakhtin (1981) claimed that the word in language is half someone else's. It only becomes one's own when the speaker or writer appropriates the word, adapting it to his or her own semantic and expressive intention. This notion, called ventriloquism (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993), assumes that any written or spoken utterance contains both the voice of the current speaker and the voices of those who have used the same words or patterns of discourse within the context in which the word or pattern of discourse was learned. Wertsch et al. developed this idea to address how students learn to "ventriloquate" through new social languages. They theorized that students need to actively appropriate the way that others converse in order to form changes in their own patterns of interaction. According to Wertsch et al., this occurs when students are encouraged and given the opportunity to appropriate or ventriloquate new social languages.

For many students, the language of novels constitutes a new social language. Thus, we need to provide children with a chance to learn to value and appropriate such language and make it their own. In this project, the vocabulary, phrases, and sentences found in children's literature were used as springboards that students could adapt in their own attempts to communicate in writing.

The Gift of Words Bank—a collection of rich descriptive phrases—made such phrases available for students to appropriate in their own writing. Ms. Cross, a grade 5 and 6 teacher, had students collect Gift of Word phrases from their own independent reading of novels, from the novels read aloud, and from poems and short stories. Once they had an adequate collection, each student received four or five Gift of Words phrases that had been written out on long sentence strips. They categorized their phrases into action, feelings, settings, personalities, and a miscellaneous category. These were then bound together and hung on the wall. As students were writing their own stories and poems, they could borrow these collections and either insert a phrase directly into their own writing or use the phrase as a model. In several of the students' stories, characters

"burst out of bed as though the sheets were afire" (Fleischman, 1980, p. 1).

Students were also taught how to use the phrases analogically to fit into the context of their own story. For example, the phrase "There are more thieves than trees in a place like this," from *The Half-A-Moon Inn* (Fleischman, 1980), became "There is more filth than clean air in a dump like this" in one student's writing. Another changed "She was a great potato of a woman" (Babbitt, 1975, p. 10) to "He was a long string bean of a man."

Another activity that developed word consciousness focused on developing possible settings for the students' stories. Ms. Cross's class discussed the importance of a good setting in a well-written story and brainstormed many different settings together. The students then picked a setting that they might use in their story. Individually, they drew or painted their setting on medium-sized tag board. When they were completed, lined paper was attached to the back, and the class circulated to write a descriptive phrase to describe each picture. Students developed setting phrases such as:

- Bright lights burst out from the tiny windows.
- The dark green grass grew taller than the house itself.
- The river flowed heavily under the lonely bridge.

The various settings were shared in authors' circles and become available for borrowing when students began to write their own stories. A similar process was followed for creating characters.

For Ms. Cross, the main objective for these activities was to prepare the students to write their own stories. She commented:

The students all told me that they would not have been able to write the stories that they did if the class bank of character cards, setting cards, and Gift of Words Bank weren't there for them to use. The more talented writers were able to take their writing that much further and the struggling writers were able to feel successful because of the structured support [that] the writing scaffolds provided

for them throughout the writing process. (in Scott, Blackstone, et al., 1996, p. 49)

Another teacher, Ms. Skobel, wrote:

> Improving student writing begins with examining how other authors use language effectively. Picture books, poems, and novels are used as the model or the text for student learning. The first aspect of improving student writing [that] I look at is the way other authors use words effectively. Students have little difficulty recognizing the figurative language used in poems and books. It is this awareness of how words are arranged that transforms a "boring" piece into a more powerful piece, *for the reader*. It is the person who is going to read a piece that I try to encourage my students to remember, just as the author we happen to be examining at any given time has thought of their reader. Authors, like painters, try to create an image for their audience; a painter with paints, an author with words. (1998, p. 23)

Word consciousness can also be developed through the critique of texts where rich description is not a primary component of the writing. In Ms. Blackstone's class, the students commented that the author did an inadequate job of describing the characters or setting in her picture book *Snow White in New York* (French, 1986). The fifth graders then decided to rewrite the book, using drama to re-enact the scenes and enhance their writing.

The story was divided into parts and distributed to groups of students. The groups acted out the sections of the story, maintaining the basic plot while they exaggerated the actions. After each segment of the story was presented, the students brainstormed descriptions of the characters' actions and appearances that were recorded on charts. Each group then rewrote their part of the story to include more colorful and powerful language. When writing, they referred to their experience while portraying the character in the story, as well as the words brainstormed by the group. Compiling the segments to create a class book became the final step of the project.

The writing shown in Table 1 indicates progress toward sophisticated writing and exploration of word use beyond what the students might have written alone. Although this is not perfect prose, the examples show how students experimented with the use of more complex language structures and vocabulary in the re-creation of the story. This story was chosen by the students, but any short story containing action, student appeal, and limited descriptive language would suffice for this activity.

Wordless picture books can also create opportunities to scaffold children's word consciousness during writing. The plot and structure of the story are given through rich visual representation. The challenge for students is the

Table 1
Sections of the Picture Book Snow White in New York (French, 1986)
as Rewritten by Grade 5 Students

Original version	Rewritten version
"The seven jazz-men, their hearts broken, carried the coffin unsteadily up the church steps" (p. 25).	At Snow White's funeral, the seven heartbroken jazzmen, their hearts shattered, shuffled up the church steps.
"Suddenly one of them stumbled..." (p. 25).	Then suddenly, one of the jazzmen slipped on a rock and skidded like a car pressing on its brakes fast.
"The poisoned cherry that had been stuck in her throat was gone" (p. 26).	The casket landed on the ground with a thud, and the cherry that had been stuck in Snow White's throat burst out.

development of words and phrases that aptly describe the elements already in place.

Our teacher-research group concluded that a focus on words in general as opposed to teaching specific words was critical for creating word consciousness within their classrooms. The teachers wanted to "turn children on to words" so that they would continue to explore and use new words and phrases on their own. As students read a variety of authors' works, they paid attention to the way authors used language and developed an extended vocabulary base; the more they wrote, the more they learned how to manipulate words and phrases to express themselves in the forms of language found most often in academic settings or in literature. As they drew upon and manipulated sophisticated language, the more natural it became to incorporate these forms into their own writing and speaking.

Word Consciousness and Teaching Specific Words

Although we have presented word consciousness in terms of generative vocabulary knowledge, it should be pointed out that word consciousness depends heavily on in-depth knowledge of specific words. We have suggested that understanding the power of word choice is crucial to word consciousness. However, one can only understand the power of word choice if one knows the (sometimes subtle) distinctions in meaning between the words among which one is choosing. A discussion of why one would choose *announce* versus *proclaim* in a given sentence doesn't work if the student has no sense of the difference in meaning between these two words. To help students develop this in-depth knowledge of specific words, in addition to extensive exposure to rich language, there also has to be some intensive instruction on specific words.

Intensive Instruction on Specific Words.
When teaching specific words, a teacher first needs to decide which words are important to teach. Some words and phrases are new labels for known concepts (e.g., *carlin* as a word meaning *old woman*), and other words are new

concepts (e.g., *photosynthesis*) (Graves, 1987). If one thinks of words as interconnected webs of meaning, hooking a new label onto a developed concept or expanding the web to include terms closely related to known words (e.g., *glance* as a form of *looking*) is much easier than creating an entirely new web to form a new concept. Direct explicit instruction may be most useful in developing understanding of a new concept or in identifying subtle differences.

In-Depth Development of New Concepts.
Let us examine for a moment two examples of exemplary direct and explicit instruction from a recent study of 23 ethnically diverse classrooms (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). In the first example, the teacher developed a thorough understanding of the concept of *symmetry* in a sixth-grade math class. She modeled symmetry, she had pairs of students use their bodies to form symmetrical and nonsymmetrical images, and students cut folded paper to create examples of symmetry. Their examples were used to discuss types of symmetry and nonsymmetrical contrasts. When it was time to use the textbook to do the math exercises, they had a well-developed concept of the word.

In the second example, another teacher helped students create a whole-class semantic map of terms related to *racism*. As they talked about these concepts and suggested ways they could be visually represented, ideas were recorded on chart paper. From this discussion, students created individual posters using pictures from magazines to represent the concept of racism. As they chose each picture, they were evaluating its depiction of the vocabulary terms introduced during the lesson.

Both of these teachers followed guidelines from recent research regarding appropriate direct and explicit vocabulary development (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). Specifically, teachers (1) helped students establish multidimensional knowledge about the words they were teaching; (2) encouraged students to connect what they knew and experienced with specific concepts; and (3) provided multiple opportunities to help students

develop subtle distinctions between related words that occurred in the same semantic field.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed word consciousness as part of the vocabulary curriculum, that is, in terms of how it contributes to vocabulary growth. However, we want to be clear that we do not consider word consciousness simply as a motivational trick to encourage students to memorize vocabulary words, an otherwise unpalatable activity. Rather, word consciousness contributes to literacy in a number of respects.

First of all, word consciousness—and especially an understanding of the power of word choice as a communicative tool—is essential for sustained vocabulary growth. Words are the currency of written language. Learning new words is an investment, and students will make the required effort to the extent that they believe that the investment is worthwhile. The world of schooling contains tens of thousands of words that most children never hear in their homes or in everyday conversations. In order to learn these words, they need to become conscious of how words work and ways they can use them as tools for communication.

Second, word consciousness is essential to effective writing. As students learn to negotiate the written word, sensitivity to word choice enhances their ability to communicate their ideas. Richard, a sixth-grade student, said:

> The most useful thing I learned as a writer this year is the Gift of Words.... I like how you take a sentence and transform it, like "*I'm afraid*" to "*heart pounding fear*." I'm going to try to make my work better by using more Gift of Words. Sometimes I don't use them. I don't know why because I can take a sentence and BOOM, it's a lot more powerful. (in Skobel, 1998, p. 23)

Third, word consciousness also contributes to reading comprehension. Word-level fix-up strategies (e.g., figuring out the meaning of an unfamiliar word from context) are essential items in one's comprehension strategy toolbox. Morphological and syntactic awareness are

particularly valuable in this realm. In addition, developing enhanced word consciousness contributes to critical reading. Students with enhanced word consciousness become more critical consumers of literature when they pay attention to an author's use of words in the books that they read. More generally, the ability to reflect on the meanings of words is an essential part of understanding decontextualized language. The language of text uses a richer vocabulary than conversation not only because of differences in content but also because the means of effective communication in textbook language are different. Beyond just having larger vocabularies, students need to understand how and why these words are used.

Teachers play a vital role in bringing word consciousness to the fore. We believe that when teachers "up the ante" by using sophisticated vocabulary in their classrooms, teach words fully so that students internalize rich word schemas, and create learning communities in which students can explore word use with a vocabulary coach at their side, they are giving their students tools they need to become successful in the world of schooling and beyond.

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Questions for Reflection

- The authors describe metalinguistic awareness as involving morphological awareness, syntactic awareness, and metasemantic awareness. How can you determine the level of awareness of your students in each of these three areas? How can you support their growth in each in order to help them achieve metalinguistic awareness and increased word consciousness?

- In your class literature circles or other book discussions, how much attention to you devote to discussing language use and word choice in the books you are reading? How can you ensure that this topic is a routine part of your book discussion activities? What opportunities exist for discussing vocabulary use in texts outside reading and language arts?