

KEY #3: Vocabulary

While lying on Waikiki Beach reading *The Prince of Tides* during the summer of 1989, I thought I was on vacation. The sand was warm, the far away sounds of the waves and happy people had become white noise, and I was living entirely inside Pat Conroy's mind. At some point, however, a hundred pages or so into the book, an unwelcome, but constant companion showed up in my conscious brain. I call her "The Critic" and I wish she would leave me alone.

The story was wonderful. So, as most of us do, when I came across a word that looked vaguely familiar and felt like it fit the context, I just skipped over it in order to find out what was going to happen next. That's when, after doing this a couple of times, The Critic kicked in and started giving me a bad time. "Is this what you want your eighth graders to do?" "Especially after the third time you've seen the same word?"

Tying to ignore The Critic I kept on reading. Probably feeling ignored, The Critic started talking to another part of my brain I thought I had left at home. The "Inner Teacher" joined in the conversation and brought up the question of how people *really* expand their vocabulary. Try as I may to keep my mind on the story, I found myself thinking about how I had been teaching vocabulary for so many years. I suspected that those exercises where kids are asked to connect a word to its definition might not have helped much at all. Typically, a teacher (or textbook company) presents a list of words that might be unfamiliar to the students before they read. Students then read a story that may even have those words in italics or underlined. Finally, the teacher (or the textbook company) gives them a test to see if they have learned the words ... or at least remember long enough to take the test.

I always knew there was more than one basic problem with this method. Many of the kids in my honors English classes already knew most of the words. The kids in the regular or fundamental classes had never seen many of the words before. Not only that, some of the fundamental or ESL kids had never seen many other words in the text so it was impossible for them to understand the story at all. These are the ones who finally give up and refuse to even try.

At any rate, I was pretty sure that outside of school people don't build vocabulary by memorizing a list of words, passing (or failing) a test, and going on to the next story or book, and the next list of words.

Meanwhile, back on the beach, my mind had wandered and I realized I had no idea what had happened on the last two pages I had "read."

One of my basic beliefs about teaching is that the teacher must be the model for learning in the classroom. I also believe that the most important thing that kids can learn in school is to *love learning*. Enthusiasm is contagious. If kids experience adults who are excited about the subjects they are teaching and who are continually learning new things, it's easy for them to pick up that enthusiasm. That belief has now been confirmed by the recent discovery of mirror neurons – brain cells that actually learn by simply picking up the behavior of another. Yes, "Monkey See / Monkey Do" is now a scientific fact.¹

So there I was, on Waikiki Beach – unable to focus on a story because I was feeling guilty about passing up an opportunity to learn. I also realized that it really wasn't a matter of remembering a few new words, but rather of discovering something new about how kids – and adults – learn.

So, I turned back two pages and found the word that had derailed my train of thought. When I read it again a couple of times in the context of the whole sentence, I realized something else: I really did know the word! I had seen it before – many times – in other contexts, but I had never taken much notice of it. I absolutely knew, though, that I had never used it – either in conversation or in writing.

As I continued reading that book, I began turning down the corner of a page where I found an unfamiliar word. (Not suggested – especially if the book isn't your own! Post-it notes actually work better and are easier to find later.) When I got home and began getting ready for the new

¹ Iacoboni, Marco. *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*.

school year . . . I pulled out my dog-eared book and began figuring out how to use what I was learning with my classes.

NATURAL LEARNING:

What follows is not a lesson plan. My belief is that it's really not new at all . . . it's simply the natural way our brains learn new words. We now know that the process of language acquisition begins before birth and it continues throughout life. The only thing new I'm suggesting is that teachers simply take time to look at the natural process and help students understand what they have been doing since before they were born . . .

We all have four lists of words in our brain. When I present these lists to kids – I ask them to think about which of their lists is the longest. I also tell them they never have to share that information – but that they just need to be aware.

The Lists:

- ★ The list of words I use when I talk.
- ★ The list of words I understand when other people talk.
- ★ The list of words I know when I'm reading.
- ★ The list of words I use when I write.

Recently I have come to realize that there is another list. Unfortunately, it's probably the one that is the most useful for kids these days when the object of school seems to be to pass standardized tests:

- ★ The list of words I can recognize well enough to pick out the right definition on a multiple choice test. (These may or may not be words that are on my other 4 lists.)

After having that discussion, I made a poster of those lists and simply left it visible in the classroom for awhile. Whenever we'd run across a word that I thought might be unfamiliar, I'd

ask them to decide which list it was on. Again, this information was never to be shared; they were just to take notice of it. Pretty soon they started glancing at the poster when an unfamiliar word would pop up.

Eventually I began asking them to them about the lists in a different way:

List A: “I have never seen this word before.”

List B: “I have seen this word – but I don’t use it and I’d have to guess what it means.”

That’s when I would introduce the idea of context clues – and how you can sometimes come pretty close to the meaning of a word by just guessing based on what is happening in the paragraph or sentence in which it is found.

My very strong advice is that if you decided to take this approach, move very slowly. Thinking back to my experience on Waikiki Beach, consider how you would feel if someone were to tell you that when you’re reading a book you have to stop and add every word you wonder about to your “A or B List.” It could very well kill reading for you.

The first time I actually tried this with a class, I asked them to fold a piece of paper in half and label the columns “A” and “B.” I asked them to see if they could find words that would fit on those list for the next few days. It wasn’t really an assignment – just a suggestion because I was honestly curious. By that time, I had already started my own two lists and I shared those with them as well. At that point I wasn’t really sure what would happen . . . I just wanted to remember my experience on the beach in Hawaii.

I began to see that the idea actually worked. The folded paper slowly developed into a simple generic template that could be used with any text. What interested me the most about the template is that when I left 8th grade and began teaching 5th grade, I didn’t have to change the form at all – not even the font size. In fact, the whole system was much easier for the younger

kids to grasp. (I have some ideas about why that is true – but I’ll leave that for you to think about.)

I’ve come to believe that the most important part of this process takes place when a student simply becomes aware – and, like I did, just starts *paying attention* to the words he or she is reading.

If you decide to use the template with a class, I would suggest that you make your own version and use it with a short story first. Limit the number of blank spaces to just a few. You won’t need the columns for “Source” or “Page” when you first introduce the process. I added the “Guess from Context Clues” column later when my class became familiar with the process and even then made it totally optional. (The concept of “etymology” was actually added for a 5th grade class that seemed to like that sort of thing! Again, always optional.)

The most important thing about this process is that it be approached as the *natural way we learn about words*. Use stories from your own experience. Adapt the process for your own situation.

The form that follows developed over several years. I always made a point that they didn’t have to “catch” every word they didn’t know. However, if they never find a word they wonder about, then perhaps the book is too easy. (Which, of course is OK when you’re reading just for fun.) On the other hand – if they are finding so many that they are having trouble understanding, they might want to save that book until later.

Name _____ Date _____

VOCABULARY - Lists A & B

A Totally Unfamiliar Words			OPTIONAL Guess from context or etymology	B Familiar words I do not use		
Word	Source	Page		Word	Source	Page

The next part of the process came directly from my “Inner Teacher.”

Needless to say, no one ever points out to 3-year-olds that they have multiple lists of words in their brains. So by the time kids reach the middle elementary school years, the process has become well-established and is totally unconscious. Since the process is already so easy, the A and B lists can be introduced almost like a game - and even left at that. The important part of this structure has already been accomplished. An unconscious process has become conscious. Metacognition. I love that word! It means *thinking about thinking* and is the basis for deep and lasting learning.

“So,” my Inner Teacher asks, “how are you going to grade this? (Homeschooling parents might be tempted to stop reading right now ... but I think there’s value in the “C” list even if you’re not required to send a report card home.)

The “C” list, like the others, was introduced slowly. The process was different for my 5th graders from what it had been for my 8th graders, and you will probably want to adapt it further to fit your needs. The reason, however, that I was so picky about the form – down to skipping lines between entries – was entirely selfish. I wanted it to be easy to grade.

At first I only asked for them to choose just one word from a short story. Later I asked for up to 5 from a novel. After doing this for awhile I began to notice some unintended side effects. One was that many times their original sentences followed the same structure as the sentence they copied from the book. My guess is that some of them may have done that to “cut corners” and make it easier for themselves. But over time, more interesting sentences began showing up in their own writing!

Another side effect of being picky about neatness and the form was that it carried over to their other work. Their handwriting improved and they began to take much more pride in what they produced.

VOCABULARY: LIST "C"

DIRECTIONS

You will be told how many words from your A and B lists to choose for your C list.

Follow this form exactly: Notice how the numbers and letters in an OUTLINE stand out because the words are INDENTED.

1. A. Word: part of speech. SOURCE AND PAGE. Pronunciation
- B. SHORT definition.
- C. COPY the sentence from the book or other source where you found the word. Underline the word.
- D. Write an original sentence showing that you know how to use the word. Make your sentences as interesting as possible. You might try using sentence patterns you find in the book you are reading. Underline the word.

SAMPLE

1. A. Gaze: noun: Island of the Blue Dolphin Page 145 (gaz)
- B. An intent, steady look.
- C. Other stars began to appear all around, but it was this one I kept my gaze upon.
- D. The painting on the wall caught his eye, and he found his gaze returning to it.

“Vocabulary AB&C” is one of the five structures or strategies that together I call “Keys to Literature.” These “Keys” are all based on unconscious, natural learning processes. Each of them worked as well, or better, with my 4th and 5th graders as with the 8th grade class that helped me develop them during the school year after my vacation in Hawaii.

The Keys are generic and can be used for studying a novel, a short story, or even a poem. Once students are familiar with how to use each one, the teacher’s role shifts to one of facilitating learning rather than “teaching” in the traditional sense.

Processes like these are based on the way we naturally learn. Even though formalizing them may feel cumbersome at first, they quickly become internalized. Sometimes, even years later, a learner may reflect back upon one of his “C List” words and remember the book he was reading at the time. Just like I do every time I think about Pat Conroy’s novel, *The Prince of Tides*, and Waikiki Beach.