**Building Word Conscious Students and the effects of Word Consciousness on Vocabulary Knowledge and Student Writing.**

**Jenovia Chunyk**
Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA
June 2011

Word consciousness, a term recently gaining popularity, has become a concept that is widely discussed in the realm of vocabulary learning and literacy in the classroom. Word consciousness, or “an awareness of and interest in words and their meanings” (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2008) has become a trait that teachers desire each of their students to develop. Word conscious students are self-motivated to discover and decipher new words, and additionally, word conscious students can use these words skillfully in their own writing and speaking (Lane & Allen, 2010). Word consciousness is just one element of a multi-faceted vocabulary program, yet a very vital component (Graves, 2008). A word conscious approach involves both the students and teacher consistently drawing attention to the use and power of words. The teacher can create word conscious moments in all subjects and activities throughout the day including read-alouds, science explorations, and historical investigations (Samway, 2009). Students who are word-conscious will continue to strengthen their own vocabularies even without the instruction and guidance of a teacher.

**BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

Building word conscious students is just one task for teachers who are teaching vocabulary in the classroom. In addition, teachers must also teach individual words, teach word-learning strategies, and provide students with frequent and varied language experiences (Graves, 2006). Why all this work just for vocabulary learning? Vocabulary growth is closely intertwined with reading. The National Research Council (1998) concluded that vocabulary development is a fundamental goal for students in the early grades. Children who enter with limited vocabulary knowledge grow much more discrepant over time from their peers who have rich vocabulary knowledge (Baker, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 1997). Students with larger vocabularies are more successful with their reading. The more they read, the larger their vocabulary grows. Therefore,
students who come to school with a smaller vocabulary will begin reading simpler books, having access to fewer and much more basic words, while their classmates with larger vocabularies will be busy adding more and more words to their ever-expanding vocabulary. This idea of “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer” has been coined “The Matthew Effect” by reading researcher, Keith Stanovich (1986). If teachers want to help all their students acquire strong vocabularies, this constantly widening vocabulary gap must be stopped. “Unless vocabulary becomes an integral part of everyday literacy instruction, the gap among groups will continue to widen, making it harder for low-performing groups to catch up to their peers” (Lane & Allen, 2010). Using a multi-faceted vocabulary program, which includes fostering word consciousness, means that teachers are addressing vocabulary instruction in a very explicit and intensive manner.

English language learners are often subject to difficulties in strengthening their second language vocabulary. According to Samway and Taylor (2009), it is “inevitable that ELs will not have the same wide vocabulary in English as their native speaking peers...this means that newcomers to English have a lot of catching up to do, even when they come with extensive vocabularies in their home languages.” A word conscious approach could provide ELs with “a solid foundation for exploring words and building knowledge about words” (Scott & Nagy, 2004). A word conscious approach to teaching vocabulary can help to increase the vocabularies of all students, regardless of their vocabulary when they enter school. This approach builds students who are cognitively aware of words and curious and willing to learn new words. Unlike other strategies such as word lists, using the dictionary as a primary resource, and direct teaching of Tier 2 and 3 words, word consciousness provides an authentic purpose for learning words and creates students with a deeper understanding of their surrounding 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” (Scott & Nagy, 2004).

This authentic purpose allows students to become invested and self-motivated in strengthening their own vocabularies. “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” (Scott & Nagy, 2004). Not only does this make our job of teaching these thousands of words easier, we can hope that these word conscious students have become lifelong learners of language. Long after graduating from our classroom, these are the students who seek out definitions, study the origins of words, enjoy playing word games, and are purely satisfied when they find that precise word for their own writing.
After hearing about the many benefits of word consciousness, I have become so enthusiastic and interested in creating word conscious students in my own classroom. I think it is vital that teachers find ways to teach vocabulary to their students that does not encourage The Matthew Effect. Teachers also need to create word-rich environments for the students so they are surrounded with new and interesting words every day. Each student should have daily opportunities to learn new words, celebrate word discoveries, and try out new language in a safe classroom environment. Creating this type of classroom, and encouraging the growth of word-conscious learners, could be the key to ridding classroom of this widening and disadvantageous vocabulary gap.

The vocabulary learning task is so huge that, according to Michael Graves (2008), a vocabulary program with multiple facets must be implemented in order to help students reach a vocabulary of over 50,000 words by the time they graduate high school. One of these facets is fostering word consciousness. Although there is plenty of literature praising and encouraging word consciousness, I have had difficulty finding research that shows how a student’s awareness of and disposition towards words can or might increase their vocabulary knowledge directly.

Research done by Samway (2009) looked at the effects of word consciousness on 4th grade writing. Her study focused on word choice and craft in student writing, but did not link a student’s writing ability to their individual level of word consciousness. Were students with well-developed and compelling writing pieces more word-conscious individuals or had they been taught word choice and craft explicitly? How did their attitudes towards language differ from those of their lower performing peers?

Last year, a case study by VINE (Vocabulary Innovations in Education) was conducted that explored vocabulary and teaching through word consciousness in fourth and fifth grade classrooms. While this study is closely linked with my own inquisitions, the study focused on teacher interventions and professional development activities. Looking specifically at one teacher over the course of three years, the researchers saw significant changes in his teaching practices and attitude towards vocabulary learning in the classroom (Miller, Gage-Serio, & Scott, 2010). While this case study shows positive changes and advances in teacher disposition and understanding of the word conscious approach, it fails to look at how the word conscious approach plays out in terms of student achievement and vocabulary growth.
Naturally, teachers want students who are excited and passionate about words and language. We want each student to think about the words they choose in their writing, and jump at the chance to define and learn new words, but does this student really have a higher vocabulary than their less enthusiastic peer? In my own research I would like to look at how just how closely connected a student’s attitude towards words and vocabulary learning is related to their actual vocabulary knowledge. My guiding research question for this project will be,

- Do word conscious students have higher vocabularies than students who are not considered word conscious?

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

*Participants and Context*

In order to examine the link between word consciousness and vocabulary knowledge, I have chosen to work with three fourth grade classrooms. I feel that fourth grade is an appropriate grade for my research study for a couple of different reasons. First, the other studies that I mentioned above were all done in fourth grade classrooms. I think this would make comparisons between my own study and these studies really convenient. Also, I think that fourth graders are reaching a point in their writing and vocabulary in which they are more comfortable experimenting with word choice. At this age and beyond, students are attempting to make their writing more compelling. They are also writing for specific audiences and in various genres. There are fewer struggles with how to write and spell, and more focus on content, word choice, and writer’s craft. This freedom allows students to become more inquisitive and experimental with words overall.

These fourth grade classrooms are part of the elementary school where I frequently substitute teach and I have great working relationships with all three fourth grade teachers. This sample of fourth graders was chosen based on convenience and my close connections with this school. In the future, if I wish to extend my study I could research fourth graders from other schools, school districts, and beyond.

*Data Methods*

These three classrooms of fourth graders will be given a written survey that asks questions regarding their attitudes toward reading and writing. I will use the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* and the *Elementary Writing Attitude Survey* created by McKenna and Kear (1990, 2000).
These surveys will help to paint a picture of each student and allows “teachers to estimate attitude levels efficiently and reliably (McKenna & Kear, 1990). I am currently still on the lookout for an additional or alternate survey that would more accurately assess a student’s level of word consciousness. Positive attitudes in reading and writing might show some shared characteristics of a word conscious student; however, I fear that these two attitude surveys will not fully assess a student’s interest and curiosity in words and the English language. The questions within these surveys address attitudes towards reading and writing in general, but do not address specific strategies students use when reading and writing, nor do the questions address vocabulary learning and word investigation. Some of the questions that I do think will be powerful include:

- How do you feel about using a dictionary?
- How do you feel about taking a reading test?
- How do you feel about checking your writing to make sure the words you have written are spelled correctly?

Once I have discovered a survey, or set of surveys, that adequately assesses a student’s word consciousness; they will be administered inside the classroom. Students will be encouraged to read over the questions and thoughtfully answer each question slowly and honestly. Students with limited English proficiency can be read the questions aloud. Students answer each question on a scale of 1-4, in which each rating is accompanied by a cartoon picture depicting the attitudes of very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat upset, and very upset. The cartoons will help English language learners to communicate their opinions and attitudes simply by pointing to the picture. (Please see appendix A and B for samples of the reading and writing surveys.)

Once this survey is administered, students will be given an additional test to look that their current vocabulary knowledge. This highly quantitative test will allow me to look at each student’s level of vocabulary knowledge including their knowledge of the definitions of and synonyms for Tier 2 and Tier 3 words. The test that I have chosen to work with is the vocabulary portion of the Gates-MacGinire Reading and Vocabulary Test. This test was used in a study by Deborah J. Mosher (1999), which looked at 4th grade vocabulary knowledge and direct vocabulary instruction. I like this test because it presents test-takers with multiple definitions for each word forcing students to really show their full understanding of each word. The test also makes great use of Tier 2 words; words that students should come across in age-appropriate texts but do not necessarily use them regularly in their own writing and speaking. (Please see Appendix C for a sample page of this vocabulary test).
Analysis

With the survey and test in hand, I hope to look at each student’s scores for both tests and see if there are any correlations between their level of word consciousness and their current level of vocabulary knowledge. Both the attitude surveys and vocabulary test will leave me with quantitative results to compare. By computing the correlation coefficient I can find the degree to which these two variables (word consciousness and vocabulary knowledge) are related. Plotting my data on a scatterplot, I will be able to see if the variables are directly or indirectly related. The size of the correlation coefficient will also tell me how strong of a relationship my two variables have. To get a closer and more individual look at my data for each student, I can use a z score, which will standardize the data, to compare the two sets of scores for each student.

Ethics

In order to conduct my research, I will need to get informed consent from the parents of each 4th grader that is taking part in the attitude surveys and vocabulary testing. Although all students will be kept completely anonymous, parents need to be aware of the research study their students could be a part of. I will be sending home an informational newsletter with each of the 4th graders describing the benefits and risks of my research study along with some of the reasons I am interested in this topic. The newsletter will also explain that each student has the right to withdraw, or parents may withdraw their student, from the study at any time.

Limitations

One limitation of my study will be my small sample size. I am using convenience sampling, and I know that these three classrooms of fourth graders are not truly representative of all fourth graders, or even all fourth graders in the area.

Another limitation of my study is that many times attitude surveys do not accurately reflect the true attitudes of students. Many times students are swayed to answer the questions in the way they think their teachers expect them to. Fortunately, I will be administering the tests and reviewing them, so hopefully students will not feel swayed to please me or answer questions in specific ways. In addition to being honest, I am also hoping that students take ample time with each question and are reflective test-takers.

A concern with my study, and something I will need to perfect before I begin, will be my testing tools. I am very aware that my surveys need to test for word consciousness and I am wary that this will pose to be a difficult task. Word consciousness is a very abstract concept that is hard
to identify in a concrete way. Students may or may not exhibit word consciousness through their attitude surveys, through their writing, through their speaking, or even in their behaviors and activities outside of the classroom. The surveys need to accurately identify attitudes and behaviors that constitute exactly what word consciousness looks like in a student.


Mosher, D.J. (1999). Improving vocabulary knowledge and reading attitudes in 4th grade students through direct vocabulary instruction. A Master’s action research project retrieved from ERIC database.


