



WORDS ARE WONDERFUL **An Interactive Approach to Vocabulary**

By Dorothy Grant Hennings

Words Are Wonderful offers meaningful vocabulary instruction employing an integrated, interactive approach in which students build their word power by

- reading, listening to, and thinking about well-structured texts written on a variety of topics
- talking about ideas and words embedded in the texts
- writing based on what they have read and heard

Students simultaneously acquire strategies that they can apply when they read and hear unfamiliar words. The program meets state standards regarding word study and is based on research and the latest theories on how children and youth expand their vocabularies.

Words Are Wonderful introduces new words through challenging and interesting selections. Students read and listen to an array of stories (fables, myths, folktales, science fiction); poems; nonfiction selections on science, animal behavior, health, history, and geography; book reports; and biographies. The stories and articles, which are appealing, substantial, and illustrated to provide pictorial cues to meaning, are on topics identified as being part of the common stock of knowledge about “people, places, sayings, happenings, and ideas that all truly literate Americans know and recognize” (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil 1988). Students respond to the selections by talking and writing about ideas and relationships. At the same time, they have the opportunity to talk and think about the new vocabulary words that are introduced from context clues in the selections.

The *Words Are Wonderful* program also emphasizes word elements—prefixes, suffixes, roots, and base words. Students have numerous opportunities to develop an understanding of relationships among words, to work with the elements within multisyllabic words, and to use what they are learning about words to propose the meanings of unfamiliar words.

The program provides activities to meet the needs of students with differing learning styles and abilities and empowers teachers to make decisions about lesson sequences and activities based on their knowledge of their own students.

In this paper, I will address the following fundamental aspects of vocabulary development that serve as a framework for *Words Are Wonderful*:

- the need for systematic word study in school language arts/reading programs and across the curriculum
- the importance of an integrated, interactive approach to word study
- the importance of teaching students to be alert to context clues

With a strong oral component and a wraparound teacher’s guide, Words Are Wonderful for grades 2–6 gives a rich array of strategies for teaching words and word parts, including dictionary skills, critical thinking, and writing. Vocabulary words are presented in context. Interactive activities and exercises help students acquire the skills they need to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words. State-standards compliant tests for Words Are Wonderful complete the program.



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- the importance of giving attention to word elements
- the need to develop word-study programs that are in keeping with children’s differing learning styles and abilities and that empower classroom teachers to make key decisions about instruction

The importance of Word Study

Hennings (2000) affirms the importance of words as the building blocks of meaning: “Research indicates that knowledge of words, ability to access that knowledge efficiently, and ability to integrate new concepts into existing conceptual schemata are key factors in reading and listening comprehension, . . . (Anderson & Freebody 1981; Chall 1987; Daneman 1988, 1991; Davis 1968; Rupley, Logan, and Nichols 1998–1999). As Daneman (1988) explains, ‘words are the building blocks of connected text.’ As a result, people with limited vocabularies have trouble understanding what they read and hear because they have ‘too few building blocks’ with which to construct meanings. For them, understanding gaps exist within the written or oral text, making construction of meaning difficult. Readers and listeners who have trouble comprehending may also be slow and inefficient in accessing the word meanings they do control. Likewise, they may have limited schemata, or existing networks of interrelated concepts and word labels. They may, therefore, have problems connecting unfamiliar concepts and word labels with what they already know (Howard, 1987; Pearson, Hansen, and Gordon 1979; Tennyson and Cocchiarella 1986).”

Based on the research evidence, educators can logically propose that schools need to provide children with numerous direct opportunities to build vocabulary and vocabulary-related

skills. As Andrew Biemiller states, “What is missing for many children who master phonics but don’t comprehend well is vocabulary, the words they need to know in order to understand what they are reading. Thus vocabulary is the ‘missing link’ in reading/ language arts instruction in our school system. . . . vocabulary deficits particularly affect less advantaged and second-language children” (Biemiller 2001).

Integrated, Interactive Word Study

“Researchers have investigated the relationships between oral language facility and reading. In a classic study tracing the language development of 338 kindergartners over a number of years, Walter Loban (1963, 1967) found a positive correlation among speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities. Youngsters with low oral ability tended to have little ability to read and write. As Terry Piper (1998) explains, ‘Children’s reading and writing are, in a very real sense, extensions of their oral language. [Children] bring their life experiences, shaped first by oral language, to the task of learning to read and write.’ Initially their ability to handle the written language is dependent on knowledge of oral language” (Hennings 2002). And as Donald Bear *et al.* remind us, “During the primary years, word knowledge is fundamentally aural” (Bear 2000). Because of the relationships between oral language facility and reading, children’s early studies in vocabulary must have a strong oral language strand and must provide ample opportunities for oral language interaction. The books in the *Words Are Wonderful* series are based on this premise.

The Standards for the English Language Arts, developed jointly by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996),



state that “students’ critical skills are nurtured in classrooms where questioning, brainstorming, hypothesizing, reflecting, and imaging are encouraged and rewarded.” The standards document further explains that language is social in that “it almost always relates to others, either directly or indirectly: we speak to others, listen to others, write to others, read what others have written, make visual representations for others, and interpret their visual representation. . . . It is important to emphasize the complex interactions that exist among the language arts.”

Likewise, state-standards documents affirm the connections among the language arts and the importance of oral language activity in children’s early language development. For example, the New Jersey language arts standards address the importance of both integration and interaction in language studies. According to the New Jersey standards for language arts literacy, “Language develops in a social context. . . . our use of language almost always relates to others. We are the active audience for those who create spoken, written, or visual texts; others listen to our thoughts and read our writing.”

An Emphasis on Context Clues

The California standards document (1998) for English/language arts explains the importance of intermediate-level students learning to use “context to gain the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Context includes the words surrounding the unfamiliar word that provide information as to its meaning.” The California standards also mandate that students have opportunities to learn and use antonyms and synonyms, use individual words in compound words to predict the meaning, and learn to interpret multiple-meaning words. The Massachusetts standards at the third/fourth grade levels propose that students identify common idioms and figurative phrases and identify playful uses of language. The Florida standards suggest that students

discuss the meanings of words and develop vocabulary through meaningful “real-world experiences.” Similarly, Texas standards focus on how vocabulary should occur through listening to and discussing challenging selections read aloud and read independently.

Theory and research affirm the importance of students’ learning to use context clues. “Using context refers to determining the meaning of an unfamiliar word by noting the way it is presented in a passage. Passages frequently provide clear, direct explanations of unfamiliar words, so students should learn to pay attention to those explanations” (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, and Moore 2000). “A . . . way to help students increase their vocabularies is to teach them skills, generalizations, and strategies that will enable them to learn words on their own. . . . *Contextual analysis* refers to using a variety of clues that exist within the context of a sentence or passage (e.g., definitions, exemplifications, synonyms, appositions, descriptions, comparisons) to infer the meanings of unrecognized written words. The teacher’s task is to help children learn to recognize such clues while they read” (Johnson 2001).

An Emphasis on Basic Word Elements

State standards uniformly address the point that English and language arts programs should introduce students to word elements and should involve students in activities that help them use their understanding of word elements to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words. California standards, for example, propose that students “use knowledge of root words to determine the meaning of unknown words within a passage” and “know common roots and affixes derived from Greek and Latin and use this knowledge to analyze the meaning of complex words.” Similarly, Texas standards suggest that students “determine meanings of derivatives by applying knowledge of the meanings of root words such as *like*, *pay*, or *happy* and affixes such as

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dis-, *pre-*, and *un-*." North Carolina standards propose that students "use their knowledge of root words, prefixes, and suffixes to determine the meaning of unknown words."

Theory and research affirm the importance of word study that emphasizes basic word elements and helps students make connections among words. "According to Corson (1985), some members of some social groups have a vocabulary that is limited to such an extent that it negatively affects their success in content area courses. . . . As Corson explained, a majority of English words are built from Graeco-Latin (G-L) elements—affixes and bases derived from the Greek and Latin languages. Additionally, within specialized fields such as the sciences and humanities, occurrence of G-L words gets 'very close to the 100% mark' (Corson, 1983). These words, however, are less commonly used in the 'ordinary language and active vocabularies of many people' (Corson 1985). . . . As a result, children growing up in families where Graeco-Latin derived words are rarely used come to content area studies with a disadvantage" (Hennings 2000).

Cunningham (1998) makes a related point. She writes, "Facility with multisyllabic words is essential for students as they read, write, and learn. Many big words occur infrequently, but when they do occur they carry much of the meaning and content of what is being read. English is a language in which many words are related through their morphology."

Furthermore, prefixes and suffixes are important elements in big words that students meet in content-area studies, especially starting in third grade. According to White, Sowell, and Yanagihara (1989), just a handful of prefixes account for the prefixes found in many, many words: *Un-*, *re-*, *in-*, and *dis-* are found at the onset of a large percent

of prefixed words, while *-s/es*, *-ed*, and *-ing* are found at the ends of a large percent of suffixed words.

Other prefixes and suffixes are common, too. Based on the work of White, Sowell, and Yanagihara (1989), J. David Cooper (2000) has compiled a list of prefixes and suffixes that merit instruction. According to Cooper, prefixes that should be considered at some point in the reading/language arts program and in reading across the curriculum are as follows:

un-, *dis-*, *in-/im-*, *non-*, and *ir-* (meaning "not")

re- (meaning "back" or "again")

un- and *dis-* (meaning "do the opposite of")

in-/im- (meaning "in" or "into")

en-/em- (meaning "in" or "into")

over- (meaning "too much")

mis- (meaning "wrong")

Suffixes that merit instruction are as follows:

-s, *-es* (indicating plural or verb tense)

-ed (indicating verb tense)

-ing (indicating verb tense)

-ly (indicating how, when, where, or under what conditions)

-er/-or (meaning "one who")

-er (indicating comparative form of adjective)

-tion/-sion/-ion/-ation/-ition (meaning "the process or act of")

-able/-ible (meaning "able to be")

-al/-ial (meaning "related to")



-y (meaning “consisting of” or “inclined toward”)

-ness (meaning “state,” “quality,” “condition,” or “degree”)

(modified from Cooper, 2000)

From the list of affixes recommended for instruction, one can quickly see that some prefixes have more than one meaning; the common prefixes *un-*, *re-*, *in-*, and *dis-* have at least two meanings each (White, Sowell, Yanagihara 1989). This shows again the importance of teaching students to be alert to context clues as they make decisions about the meanings of unfamiliar words. Both context and word structure clues must be considered in a comprehensive vocabulary-development program.

In a similar vein, Burns, Roe, and Ross (1999) contend that structural analysis must be a component of reading/vocabulary development programs. They write, “Knowing meanings of common affixes and combining them with meanings of familiar root words can help students determine the meanings of many new words.” Similarly, J. David Cooper (2000) writes that “the goal of vocabulary development is for students to achieve independence in word learning because the number of words to be learned is too large for them to be taught individually. . . . the way to achieve this independence is to make students aware of words and help them develop a strategy for independently inferring word meanings.” Cooper enumerates the following components of structural analysis: base words, root words, prefixes, suffixes, inflectional endings such as *-ed* and *-ing*, compound words, and contractions; he reminds the educator that teachers must have considerable knowledge of word morphology if they are to construct lessons based on these components.

Word Study That Meets Individual Learning Styles and Needs

Words Are Wonderful provides specialized and enrichment activities that meet individual learning styles, abilities, and language backgrounds. In addition, a Book Spot in each lesson lists related readings that students can pursue on their own or in groups. This is in keeping with current research and theory.

Howard Gardner (1993, 1995) proposes a theory of multiple intelligences: People have different kinds of intelligences—linguistic, spatial/visual, bodily/kinesthetic, and so forth. Some people are strong linguistic learners whereas others learn better when there is a visual dimension, an oral dimension, or a physical dimension. Teachers should offer students a “wide variety of project options” and offer them choices so that students can tap into their “preferred ways of learning and showing their knowledge” (Tompkins 1998).

“Academically gifted children tend to be rapid language learners. They read at an early age and may enter school as self-taught readers and writers. They have vocabularies that astound the average adult and perform higher-level cognitive tasks with ease. As a result, they require little drill with the basics. Instead of drilling, the teacher must open doors that encourage youngsters to discover, reflect, and think critically” (Hennings, 2002).

Today, many classrooms are home to children who are learning English as a second language. As Tompkins (1998) explains, “Culture affects the way people think and the way they use language. . . . Children from each cultural group bring their unique backgrounds of experience to the process of learning. . . . Children’s cultural and linguistic diversity provides an opportunity to enhance and enrich the learning of all students.”

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Dorothy Grant Hennings, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Kean University in New Jersey, is the author of many books, including *Communication in Action: Teaching Literature-based Language Arts*, 8th edition (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), *Vocabulary Growth for College Word Study* (Prentice-Hall, 2001), and *Reading with Meaning: Strategies for College Reading*, 5th edition (Prentice-Hall, 2002). Dr. Hennings has also written numerous journal articles published in *The Reading Instruction Journal*, *The Reading Teacher*, *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, and other language arts publications.

After receiving her undergraduate degree from Barnard College and her master's degree from the University of Virginia, Dr. Hennings earned her doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University. She began her teaching career as an elementary school teacher in Rutherford, New Jersey, and then served as a teacher and guidance counselor in junior high school. Dr. Hennings taught at Kean University for over 35 years, where she prepared thousands of students to become teachers and where she developed the graduate-level course in language arts education.

In 1992, Dr. Hennings was the recipient of the Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award presented by the International Reading Association; and in 1993, she received the New Jersey Reading Association's Distinguished Service Award. She is a member of many honor societies, including Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi, and is listed in *Who's Who in America*.

Dr. Hennings is a frequent and popular presenter at state and national conferences of such organizations as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development. She lives in New Jersey with her husband George and is an avid world traveler. Her hobbies are reading, visiting libraries, and solving crossword puzzles and cryptograms.

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