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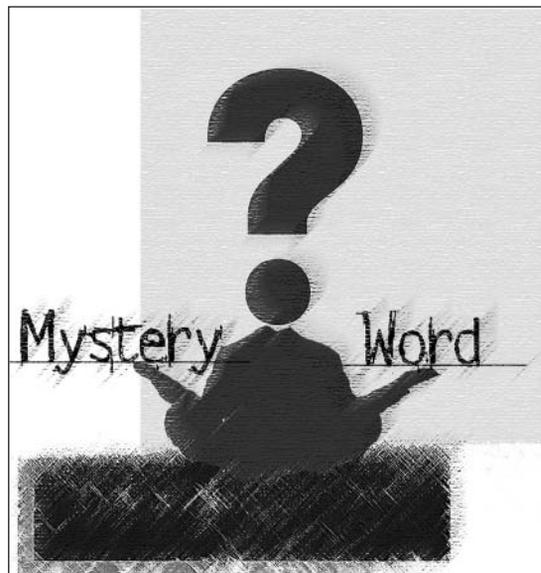
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Motivate Students to Engage in Word Study Using Vocabulary Games

Jenny C. Wells¹ and Drue E. Narkon¹



Keywords

vocabulary, motivation, learning disabilities, vocabulary games, reading

Vocabulary instruction across the content areas aids reading comprehension, making it time well spent in the classroom (Ebbers & Denton, 2008). Although students with learning disabilities (LD) need many practice opportunities to learn new words (Charlton, Williams, & McLaughlin, 2005), engaging them in vocabulary instruction may prove challenging. Due to their past difficulties in acquiring reading skills, they may quickly become discouraged and give up when presented with new words. A factor in students' willingness to allocate their time and effort is their interest and motivation (Sideridis, Mouzaki, Simos, & Protopapas, 2006). Therefore, targeting motivation, as well as reading

skills, is important when designing vocabulary instruction for students with LD (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007).

A motivational process that has been associated with reading is personal interest (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999). Personal interest in a reading activity influences the student's depth of cognitive processing and comprehension

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Table 1. Progression of Teacher Clues for a Mystery Word

Posted word list

never snows light winter ice cold mittens skates freeze icicle
 night sled white warm snowman cap scarf penguin igloo sleet

Sample conversation

Teacher: "I have written down a mystery word."

Student: "Teacher, what is the word?"

Teacher: "The mystery word is one of the words on the posted word list."

Teacher: "The mystery word has 5 letters."

Student: "Is the mystery word snows?"

Teacher: "No, the mystery word begins with the letter **n**."

Student: "I know teacher, the mystery word is never."

Teacher: "Good try, but this mystery word rhymes with light."

Student: "This is too hard teacher. We need some more clues."

Teacher: "The mystery word is different from daytime. Do you know what the mystery word is now?"

Student: "Teacher, I think I know the word. The mystery word is night."

Teacher: "Great job!" "The mystery word is night. It has 5 letters and begins with the letter **n**. It rhymes with the word light."

The students will write the word **night** on their paper, and the teacher will circle the word on the chart paper. The students and teacher will discuss the meaning of the word **night**. Next time, a new mystery word from the classroom will be introduced.

(Alexander, Jetton, & Kulikowich, 1996), with higher student interest resulting in improvements in learning. One means of increasing student motivation to actively participate in word study activities is to disguise instruction as play by using word games (Charlton et al., 2005).

The addition of word games to teacher-led, direct instruction of reading skills resulted in accelerated learning and maintenance of the targeted skills in a study conducted by Charlton et al. (2005). They noted that word games provide repeated exposure to the target vocabulary words in an intrinsically and extrinsically motivating context that may result in overlearning and facilitate transfer of learning to new material. Charlton et al. also suggested that students need to see the relevance of what is being taught for generalization to occur. Word games can provide a reason and a context for students to learn and actively use the target vocabulary. The resulting recognition that students receive from their peers and teachers for success in reading during games also increases their enjoyment in these activities (Baker & Wigfield, 1999).

Another effective instructional practice for students with reading difficulties, using cooperative groups, reflects the importance of promoting active cognitive and verbal interaction and collaborative engagement in learning (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003). Classroom vocabulary games provide a social context and a social purpose for reading. Verbal interaction is increased during active word games and often results in frequent and specific feedback in a cooperative learning environment with peers (Mathes, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1997). In addition, vocabulary games can be designed for pairs or small groups of students that require them to construct and share word meanings, increasing attention

and active engagement in the word study. Incorporating mechanisms for students to help one another during game play (i.e., ask a friend, consult with group) helps build a culture of cooperation that further emphasizes interaction and cooperation.

Overview of Vocabulary Games

Vocabulary games can be designed to supplement teacher-directed instruction and support student comprehension and mastery of important content. They are often adaptations of commercially developed games (e.g., *So You Want to Be a Millionaire*) or well-established childhood games (e.g., *20 Questions*, *Bingo*). Games need easy-to-follow rules and procedures that can be clearly communicated and remembered by all players. The most important aspect of a vocabulary game is that it be fun (Charlton et al., 2005). Three vocabulary games that we have used to assist students' vocabulary acquisition that students have enjoyed in our elementary classrooms are (a) *Mystery Word* (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999), (b) *Word-O* (Harris & Sipay, 1990), and (c) *Word Sorts* (Vacca & Vacca, 1989; Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009). Descriptions of these games and suggestions for preparation prior to implementing them with students follow.

Mystery Word

Mystery Word is a whole-class, teacher-led word game. Prior to playing the word game, the teacher ensures that at least 20 words are displayed in the classroom (e.g., on a

word wall, chart paper, flash cards). The teacher selects a word and writes it on a piece of paper and folds up the paper. The students in the class are given a series of clues by the teacher. After each clue, the students are given a chance to identify the mystery word. Each clue should narrow down the selection from the 20 words. The teacher continues giving clues until the students guess the mystery word. An example of the progression of clues that a teacher might provide for a mystery word is shown in Table 1 (Cunningham et al., 1999).

Word-O

Word-O is an adaptation of the game Bingo (Harris & Sipay, 1990). The game can be played using the rules from Bingo, or modified rules can be created as desired by the teacher. Students are provided with a word game card that is modeled after Bingo. The teacher calls out a word, and the students examine their card to see if they have the word called. If they have the word on their card, they cover it with a chip or any small item (e.g., counting blocks or beans). It is important to discuss teacher expectations of management of game chips during the game. The first child to cover an entire row (i.e., vertical, horizontal, or diagonal) on his or her card calls out “Word-O!” Then, the class checks to ensure Word-O has been achieved by having the child who called “Word-O” read back each word on the winning row so that the teacher and students can check for accuracy. The game can continue until someone has all words correct or until the allocated time ends. Students can also play in pairs so that they can help one another find and read the words called.

The vocabulary words for the game cards can be content-specific (e.g., parts of the human body) or can be selected from the reading curriculum. The words are randomly placed on the word cards so that no two cards are exactly alike. Although the teacher can prepare the word cards in advance, it is excellent practice for the students to write the vocabulary on a blank word card template provided by the teacher (see Figure 1). A blank Word-O game card template can be made using table tools in word-processing software. The game card can be made with 9, 16, or 25 blocks depending on the time you wish to allocate to game play and the age of students. The teacher can use a prepared word list to call the words or may draw word cards from a shuffled deck.

For young readers learning high-frequency words, the teacher may have the students spell the word aloud before they cover it with a chip on their game card. For older students learning content vocabulary, the teacher may call out definitions and have the students cover the word that they believe matches the definition. If the student who originally calls “Word-O” does not have all correct words selected, the class can continue to play until someone has a correct

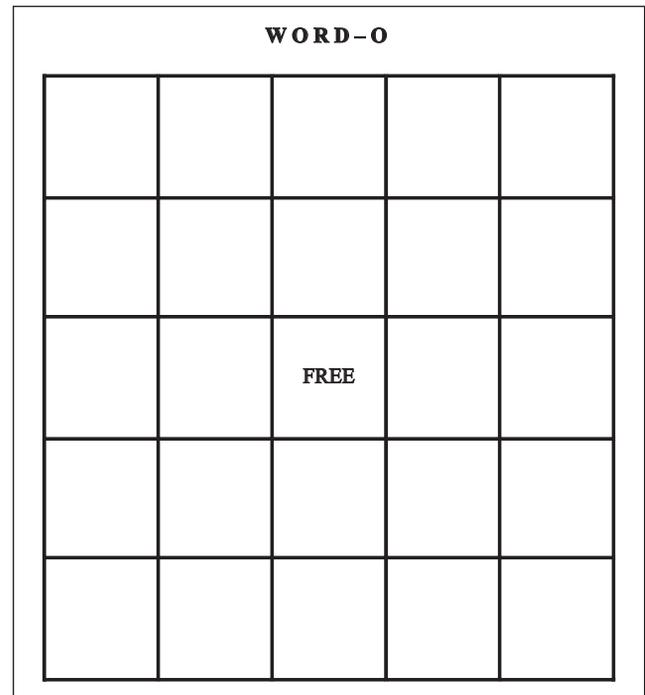


Figure 1. A Word-O game board

Word-O and can give the matching word for all definitions called out. One middle school teacher shared, “The students really enjoy this game and it is a great way to reinforce vocabulary of any type” (Spivey, 2008).

Word Sorts

“Word sorting actively engages students in exploration and analysis as they search for similarities and recognize differences between and among words, compare and contrast word features, and form generalizations that they can apply to new words” (Williams et al., 2009, p. 577). Working in pairs or small groups, students are instructed to sort words into categories they can identify. The teacher instructs the students to think about how the words might be alike (e.g., chicken and fish are foods; a leaf, a dollar, and lime Jell-O are things that are green).

The teacher can introduce an open or closed word sort for older students working in pairs or small groups. The teacher prepares a selection of words in advance of the lesson and then instructs the students to creatively make arrangements of two or more words. Table 2 shows an example of an open word sort of famous people. Students will share arrangements of words and their rationale for the categories that they develop.

Table 3 illustrates a closed word sort for social studies. Closed word sorts include the vocabulary words and categories already preselected by the teacher prior to the lesson.

Table 2. Open Word Sort

How many different groups can you make? Each group needs to include two or more names of famous people. You can use a name more than once. You need to state a reason for each of your groups.

George Washington	Booker T. Washington
Lewis & Clark	Napoleon
Thomas Edison	Monet
Christopher Columbus	Winston Churchill
Benjamin Franklin	Margaret Thatcher
Andrew Jackson	Julius Caesar
Albert Einstein	Henry Ford
Queen Elizabeth	Princess Diana

Sample group responses

Caesar and Napoleon are foods. Caesar salad and Napoleon dessert

Christopher Columbus and Lewis & Clark were explorers

George Washington and Andrew Jackson are found on money

Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford were inventors

Queen Elizabeth and Princess Diana are royalty

Table 3. Closed Word Sort

Vocabulary words

Cow	Zebra	Cat	Giraffe
Elephant	Pig	Horse	Dog
Canary	Hippopotamus	Sheep	Rabbit

Categories

Farm animals

Domestic animals

Zoo animals

The students select the vocabulary words that they think are appropriate for each category.

Preparing for Word Games

In our experience, before incorporating a vocabulary game into classroom instruction, the following items should be implemented: (a) selection of vocabulary, (b) allocation of instructional time, (c) materials preparation, (d) review of rules and sportsmanship, and (e) additional support strategies.

Selection of vocabulary. First, select vocabulary that supports students' reading development and content-area learning. Also examine the curriculum to identify words that may cause confusion, such as homonyms or words with multiple meanings. Prepare student-friendly definitions for each word in advance of the word game. To increase student attention and engagement, when possible, select words that are related to the interest of students. Take the time to talk to

the students and discover the topics that are interesting to them. Are they interested in the animal world, the great outdoors, or building model cars and airplanes? Making connections between the target vocabulary and these topics may also stimulate their interest, thus increasing their motivation.

Allocation of instructional time. Instructional time may be divided into explicit teacher-led instruction followed by a word game using the target vocabulary, or word games may be embedded into the teacher-led instruction. In a divided format (i.e., instruction followed by word play), students are instructed to attend and participate in the initial instruction to learn the words that will be used in the word game after teacher instruction.

Materials preparation. Materials for word play activities are easily created from items that are readily available in most classrooms or can be obtained at minimal cost (e.g., card stock, chips, paper, and lamination film). Word cards can be filed alphabetically in an index box for storage and easy retrieval. Game board templates can be created using word-processing software. In addition, there are websites where game boards or templates can be created and printed (e.g., <http://teachers.net>). For many word play activities and games, this is all that is needed. For others, be sure to keep a template of the game board that you can easily duplicate to use in your future lessons. Game boards will be more durable and last longer if laminated.

Review of rules and sportsmanship. Based on our personal experiences, the rules of games and good sportsmanship must be taught explicitly to reduce behavior management issues from arising during game play. Before beginning a game, take the time to introduce it to the whole class by playing it with one student in front of the other students. Model appropriate feedback and have students practice giving each other feedback before the game begins. Follow that by having two students play the game while the rest of the students are encouraged to ask questions. Questions that students typically ask include issues about cheating and getting second chances.

Additional support strategies. Review the learning needs of individual students and the types of supports that might be necessary for them to understand and participate in the vocabulary game. Options might include (a) providing students with individual game word lists to use at their desks in addition to providing the word list on an interactive whiteboard or chart paper, (b) providing picture clues for words, and (c) providing written rules. Make adaptations to the vocabulary game to further incorporate visual cues and other support strategies, as needed.

Effectiveness of Word Games

Using word play or word games is an effective practice for improving student vocabulary learning (Berne &

Blachowicz, 2008). The introduction of vocabulary games can result in a dramatic increase in on-task behavior and word acquisition. Berne and Blachowicz (2008) reported that after a semester of remedial reading instruction, 3 fifth-grade male students, who had not mastered the majority of the second-grade vocabulary on the Dolch Word List, made improvements in vocabulary acquisition that were dramatic after introducing word games. Within a month, they had mastered all of the second- and third-grade sight words along with other content-specific vocabulary.

Conclusion

The addition of word games to vocabulary instruction can boost student motivation to cognitively engage with vocabulary, thus producing improvements in acquisition rates (Charlton et al., 2005) and deeper levels of processing (Alexander et al., 1996). Designing instruction to include word games requires some additional decision making and preparation, but the rewards in student attention and enthusiasm are significant. With some prelesson preparation and a little teacher creativity, vocabulary lessons can become the highlight of the students' day.

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