

The Story Behind Comprehension and Verbs

The significance of verbs was apparent whenever I wrote with my grade one students. Since my students had limited reading and writing vocabularies, I created lessons for my sequence stories with vocabulary word webs based on nouns and verbs. (A sequence story is based on a writing about a series of three or more pictures). The nouns and verbs scaffolded basic sentences. The word webs were created together through class discussions. I found that the best questions to ask were "What?" which elicits a noun and "What's it doing?" which elicits verbs. Together the nouns and verbs created the building blocks necessary to form sentences. I also taught my students that we can glue two ideas together using the glue words and, as, while. If the children lacked vocabulary, I provided it. In addition, we acted out the verbs.

"Boys and girls, this story shows a knight heading into the forest with his lance.

What do you think the knight sees or hears?"

"Birds."

"Good. What were the birds doing?"

"Singing."

"Yes, are there any other words to describe singing?"

"Chirping or whistling."

"Excellent. Who wants to show the class how to sing/chirp/whistle?"

"What else might the knight see or hear?"

"Bees."

"What do bees do?"

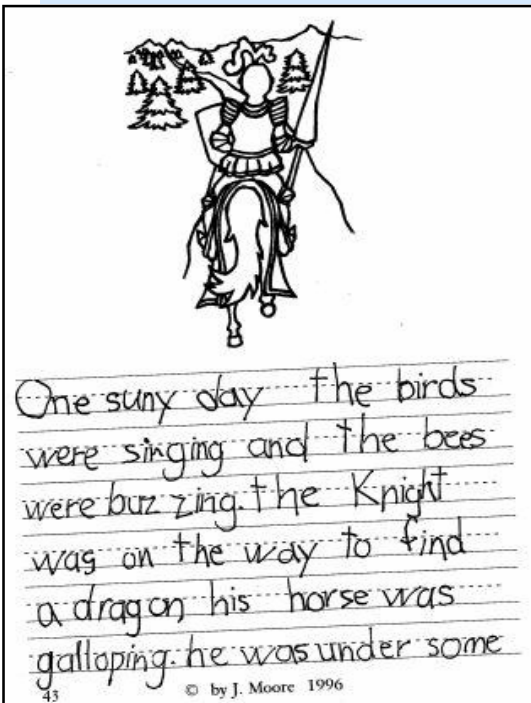
"Buzz, zip, soar."

"Wonderful! Who wants to show the class how to buzz/zip/soar?"

The vocabulary webs were recorded with rebus pictures which I drew as I wrote down the students' suggestions.:

One	sunny	day	birds	singing	and	bees	buzzing
	bright			chirping			zipping
	warm			whistling			soaring

Next, I modelled how to use the vocabulary to write a sentence. The students then wrote their own sentences and shared them aloud with a partner. Students edited the single sentence for spelling and punctuation. The process began again as we brainstormed another vocabulary web for the next sentence in the story. This process was repeated until the story was completed.





One sunny day the birds were singing and the bees were buzzing. The knight was on the way to find a dragon his horse was galloping. he was under some

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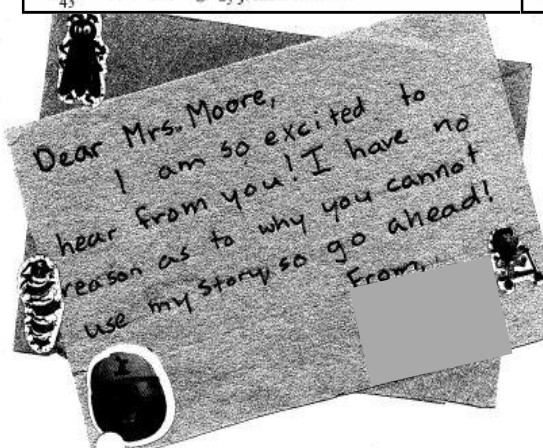


twigs his medl sute was going cling clang. Suddenly the knight heard flapping of two giant wings and saw the dark shadow of a dragon. Bones were falling from the sky. then he looked



up and saw the dragon. The dragon swooped down then the knight ducked. then the dragon picked up the knight. The knight had planed for the dragon to pick him up. When

The dragon got to his cave and landed. The knight stabbed the dragon then the dragon fell backded so the knight got the gold. then he got on his horse and raced to the palis and gave the gold to the king. The king thanked the knight and said now for your reaword to marry the princess. I



NOTE: Sometimes when a noun was selected, the children could not think of verbs for it. In those moments, I suggested the verb vocabulary and had the children dramatize it to make sure they understood the new words.

There were several significant understandings I gained from these experiences. One was that only two or three children from each class volunteered all the verbs for the word webs. The rest sat in silence—some in open astonishment. One afternoon a student turned around and said to the child volunteering all the verbs, "How do you know all those words?"

"I'm not sure," _____ responded.

It was soon obvious that these students were intuitive writers. Most often they were introverts who shied away from being in the spotlight. However, they shone their brilliance to the other students during these story writing discussion by sharing their verb vocabulary with the rest of the class. Gradually writing based on these noun/verb word webs shifted and improved all the children's writing. It was also fun to find out that these children were smart enough to keep their best ideas for themselves. While reading _____'s story (see above) I was delighted with, "his medl sute was going cling, clang."

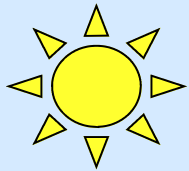
"I never thought about the fact that the knight might hear his suit of armour making noise. What a great description! I wish the rest of the class had heard your onomatopoeia words."

Eyes twinkling, _____ responded "I didn't want anymore copycat stories!"



I also began to realize that a child's verb vocabulary has a profound effect on his/her abilities to follow instructions. All day long, teachers use directives to teach and keep order. A limited verb vocabulary explained why some students took their cues from other children and were frequently one step behind the rest. For example, "Hang up your coat, tie your shoes, sit on the carpet, cross your legs, fold your hands, zip your lips and put your eyes on me, requires a child to know and apply the meaning of the verbs: hang, tie, sit, cross, fold, zip, and put." How many children at age six know the meanings of these verbs?

The year I had a speech pathologist working in my classroom, she caught the end of a writing lesson where we were creating and using word webs. It grabbed her attention and the next week she shared an important piece of research with me. The article stated that children with SLI, specific expressive language impairment, had a small verb vocabulary and rarely used intransitive and ditransitive verbs. This research affirmed the importance of the noun/verb vocabulary word webs which helped children develop their verb vocabulary and use intransitive verbs! (See research on next two pages.)



Intransitive verb examples:

Sunlight gleamed.

Gently, the wind whispered.

Chickadees whistled and sang.

NOTE: A number of years later, I came across the book Bringing Words to Life by Beck, McKeown, Kucan which linked reading and writing success to a broad vocabulary.

Verb Vocabulary Research

- **American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology Vol 7 No. 1 Feb 1998**
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- **Recommending Intervention for Toddlers with Specific Language Learning Difficulties:
We May Not Have All the Answers, But We Know a Lot**
-
- by Lesley B. Olswang, Barbara Rodriguez, GERALYN TIMLER
- University of Washington, Seattle
-
- ...children with SLI (specific expressive language impairment) have a small vocabulary in relation to age and a less diverse vocabulary
- composition, particularly in regards to verbs, and are likely good
- candidates for intervention. *Particular red flags would be the*
- *production of general all-purpose verbs* (such as want, go, get, do, put, look, make, got) and few intransitive and ditransitive verbs.
- For these children, approximately 8 to 10 percent of their verb types
- accounted for 40 to 50 percent of verb possibilities.
-
- **SLI children use:**
- ***more transitive verbs** (need someone or something to perform the action and a person or thing being acted upon)
- eg. Susie *hit* the ball.
- (subject) transitive verb (object)
- ***few intransitive verbs** (verbs which do not require an object)
- eg. The pine trees *swayed*.
- ***few ditransitive verbs** (verbs which may or may not take a direct object such as *smell*)
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NOTE:

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- a) the source; and
- b) if given the source, the name of the author, in the case of a work...

Selecting Vocabulary to Teach

- Focus on words which are widely used and found in multiple contexts.
- Example: exchange
- Research has shown that if children are taught early on the importance of noticing new words and widening their vocabulary, they are far more likely to begin doing so independently and to develop a love of words.

Bringing Words to Life Beck, McKeown, Kucan



Teaching Strategies:

1. Define multiple meanings.
2. Use new word in a sentence.
3. Ask student a time when they would employ the selected word and how they would use it.
4. Challenge students to use the word both in that day's conversation and written work. This increases retention significantly.



Adapted from Bringing Words to Life Beck, McKeown, Kucan



Another Story About Comprehension and Verbs

One afternoon I had finished up my lesson in one of my writer's in residence classrooms and was gathering my things.

"Hi Mrs. Moore, how are you?"

Looking up, I saw one of the students from the class.

"I'm very well," I smiled at the fifth grader. "So how are things with you?"

"Pretty good," he said.

"What's the book you're holding?" I asked.

He held up a copy of Silverwing by Kenneth Oppel. "It's supposed to be great, but I'm finding it kind of boring."

"I've heard of it. Didn't it win an award?"

"Yup. In fact it won quite a few awards. I know for sure it won the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year Award."

"Wow, how could it possibly be boring?" I wondered. "Could I read the first page?"

"Sure, but then I've got to go," he grinned.

"Of course," I nodded and flipped the book open to the first page. The opening scene was charged with action and I couldn't help noticing the author's use of verbs (see next page).

I handed the book back and said, "It's definitely not boring. There must be another reason you're not enjoying it."

Later I borrowed a copy and wrote down all the verbs used on the first page of the book (see next page). They were incredible. Suddenly, I realized why this student was finding the book boring—he had not yet acquired this wide base of verbs necessary for enjoying all the action. Once more, I was impacted by how important the verb vocabulary word webs (story writing, story writing mini-lessons and five sentence paragraphs) were for helping students establish solid reading comprehension.



Without understanding the **verbs** in a story or novel a child cannot comprehend story action.

Verbs found on page one of Kenneth Oppel's novel

- | | |
|-----------|------------|
| •skimming | •whistled |
| •heard | •flared |
| •warming | •braking |
| •flapped | •swooped |
| •picking | •flicked |
| •homed | •volleyed |
| •whined | •veered |
| •streaked | •cracked |
| •flashing | •savored |
| •hummed | •squirted |
| •glowed | •chomped |
| •edged | •swallowed |

Excerpt taken from *Silverwing* by Kenneth Oppel for the purpose of criticism (showing how a wide verb vocabulary is essential to building comprehension skills). The use of this passage is covered under the Fair Dealing of Canadian Copyright law under section 29.1 (criticism or review) which states "Fair dealing for the purpose of *criticism* or *review* does not infringe the copyright if the following are mentioned:

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