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Vocabulary : a building block in reading

Lisa L. Capper
University of Northern Iowa

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Capper, Lisa L., "Vocabulary : a building block in reading" (2002). *Graduate Research Papers*. 461.
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Vocabulary : a building block in reading

Abstract

From all of my reading and research, I learned that vocabulary is an essential part of teaching. In all of the curriculum areas, knowledge of vocabulary is important. With word understanding, comprehension grows and so does the student's knowledge.

Vocabulary development activities not only include many opportunities for students to be actively involved with reading a variety of books, but, through vocabulary instruction, the teacher directly teaches important words and strategies to help students understand what they are reading. Through the use of a variety of strategies I observed how different strategies can help students learn and grow in their knowledge. I now know a variety of strategies that work effectively with students that I might not have tried without doing my research for this project.

Vocabulary: A Building Block in Reading

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Division of Reading Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Lisa L. Capper

May 3, 2002

This Project by: Lisa L. Capper

Titled: Vocabulary: A Building Block in Reading

has been approved as meeting the project requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

6-30-02

Date Approved

Penny L. Beed

Graduate Faculty Reader

7-2-02

Date Approved

Charline J. Barnes

Graduate Faculty Reader

7/3/02

Date Approved

Rick Traw

Head, Department of Curriculum and
Instruction

Vocabulary: A Building Block in Reading

My name is Lisa Capper and I am currently in the process of finishing my master's degree at the University of Northern Iowa in reading education. To complete my degree I conducted a graduate project with my third grade students in the fall of 2001.

I am a third grade teacher at Tripoli Elementary School. Last year the elementary school implemented a new reading basal published by Harcourt. It was during our implementation and everyday use of this reading basal that I found a need to help build vocabulary development with my students. Many of the new vocabulary words introduced prior to reading the story were unfamiliar to the students. After I introduced the new vocabulary words and assigned the vocabulary workbook page, many of my students were not successful with this workbook assessment. It was a struggle to find strategies that might help my students have more success.

It was during our school workshop on how to use Inspiration Software that a colleague and I decided to work on a project that would help students develop vocabulary. Once the project was completed, we began to implement it in our classrooms. I observed much enthusiasm from my students as we began using this new project. The new word was written on their sheet and pronounced. The students would then look the word up in the thesaurus to find two or three synonyms for the new word and hopefully make the connection from the new word to a familiar synonym. The next step was to have each student write a sentence using the new vocabulary word

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correctly. The final step was to create a picture that would go along with their sentence.

After implementing this new strategy I saw improvement with the students' understanding of the new vocabulary words and improvement on the workbook assessment. It was a successful strategy that seemed to improve student learning.

It was through this success that my interest in implementing more strategies in the classroom to improve vocabulary development grew. I therefore proposed a project which included two major elements. The first element was a review of the literature which would support the need for improving vocabulary development. The second element was the research and implementation of strategies to improve vocabulary development using both the reading basal and other children's literature.

I believe this project helped my students improve their vocabulary, but it also improved my knowledge of vocabulary strategies and how to implement them into my classroom.

Review of Literature

Vocabulary instruction is an integral component of teaching children how to read both narrative and informational text (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension: we cannot understand text without knowing what most of the words mean (Honig, Diamond, Gutlohn, 2000). Vocabulary is partially an outcome of comprehension skills, and reading comprehension is partially an outcome of vocabulary. Thus, they provide a mutual benefit in promoting reading development (Daneman, 1991). Not having access to the

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meanings of words representative of the concepts and content of what they read causes difficulty in children's comprehension of texts, limits their ability to make a connection with their existing background knowledge, and inhibits their capacity to make coherent inferences (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1998).

According to Irvin (1998), people have four types of vocabulary: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The listening and reading vocabularies are receptive, and the speaking and writing vocabularies are expressive. Most students enter school with fairly large listening and speaking vocabularies - ranging from 2,500 to 5,000 words (Beck & McKeown, 1991). Data collected by White, Graves, and Slater (1990) on the size of students' reading vocabularies indicate that even first grade students have reading vocabularies ranging from 3,000 - 10,000 words and that their reading vocabularies indeed grow each year by 3,000 - 4,000 words. It is therefore recommended that both direct instruction and wide reading are means for fostering vocabulary development (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999).

The majority of word meanings are learned through everyday experiences with oral and written language (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991). According to Nagy (1988) increasing the volume of students' reading is the single most important thing teachers can do to promote large-scale vocabulary growth. Therefore, if wide reading is the most important vehicle for large-scale vocabulary growth, then helping students to make the most of learning words independently is imperative (Irvin, 1998). It is crucial that students learn

Vocabulary: A Building Block strategies for learning word meanings independently (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1988). Some of these strategies might include using context, learning and using word parts, and using glossaries and the dictionary.

Though it is clear that wide reading provides students with many rich and meaningful contexts for word learning, there is still a place for vocabulary instruction (Blachowicz & Lee, 1991). In order to facilitate vocabulary development, intentional vocabulary instruction in specific concepts and word meanings is necessary (Baumann & Kameenui, 1991; Nagy, 1988), particularly for those words that are conceptually difficult or that represent complex concepts that are not part of students' everyday experience. Comprehension of a text depends crucially on knowledge of specific words that may not be familiar to some students (Nagy, 1988). Teaching individual words pays benefits beyond the learning of individual words. Teaching individual words focuses students' attention on words, lets them know that we value word knowledge, and leaves them with a richer store of words, which itself facilitates their learning additional words from context (Graves, 1992).

Research has indicated that effective instruction consists of a variety of techniques to help students make connections between unfamiliar words and their own prior knowledge (Stahl, 1999). Students ought to be engaged in learning new words and expanding their understanding of words through instruction that is based on active processing. That is, students are not just memorizing definitions but are entering information and integrating word meanings with their

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existing knowledge to build conceptual representations of vocabulary in multiple contextual situations (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). Knowing a word in the fullest sense goes beyond simply being able to define it or get some sense of it from the context. Active processing that associates experiences and concepts with words contributes significantly to vocabulary growth, enhanced comprehension, and continuous learning (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). The following instructional guidelines reflect the inclusion of these active processing components.

1. Select words for vocabulary instruction that come from texts that students will read in the classroom. This helps make the meanings of words relevant to the context in which they appear and helps to build connections between existing knowledge and new knowledge.

2. Base instruction on language activities as a primary means of word learning. The focus of the activities should be on engaging the students in generating the learning of new words to enhance remembering and deep processing of the words. Students should be provided multiple opportunities to use new words in their speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities.

3. Build a conceptual base for learning new words. Use analogies, language features, and other relationships to known words to activate students' background knowledge of concepts related to new words.

4. Provide a variety of instructional strategies to store word knowledge (mental pictures, visual aids,

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kinesthetic associations, smells, tastes, etc.) (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996; Blachowicz & Lee, 1991, pp. 188 - 195).

Semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, word mapping, and webbing are effective instructional strategies that incorporate many of the guidelines for active processing of vocabulary. These instructional activities enable students to expand their vocabularies, understand relationships between existing and new information, and learn (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999).

In conclusion, vocabulary development depends not only on immersing students in a variety of reading but also in providing direct instruction using meaningful contexts that actively involve the students by incorporating their background experiences. Vocabulary development is an essential part of comprehension and it should be integrated into the curriculum using the students' texts and building on the students' prior knowledge.

How Do Children Learn Words?

According to Johnson (2001) for every child learning any language, three separate but related tasks are required to learn word meanings. The first task is a naming task. Learners must make the discovery that certain sequences of speech sounds that they hear and later articulate serve as the names and labels of things. The second task in word-learning requires grouping things that fit together under the same label. The third word-learning task involves figuring out how different words relate to one another within and across categories. These three word-learning tasks, naming, classifying, and relating, are significant individual

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discoveries that begin early in life and are employed in vocabulary acquisition throughout life (Johnson, 2001).

Continuous cultivation of students' language ability is the foundation for vocabulary growth (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 2001). Our vocabularies are the clearest examples of social construction in action; most of our vocabulary learning takes place in encounters with others, through first-hand experiences, through talk, and through reading (Anderson & Nagy, 1984; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1999).

Why Teach Vocabulary?

Research indicates that the most important factor in variability in reading comprehension is word knowledge (Ruddell, 1994). Anderson and Freebody (1985) concur, stating that it is probably safe to say that the number of word meanings a reader knows is an accurate predictor of his or her ability to comprehend text. Although growth in vocabulary knowledge occurs rapidly and almost effortlessly for some children, the rate at which word meanings are acquired can vary greatly (Biemiller, 1999). Teachers must therefore realize the importance of vocabulary instruction in their classrooms.

One way teachers can increase general, nonfocused vocabulary growth is to have students engage in lots of reading (Johnson, 2001). Wide reading improves children's vocabulary knowledge. It also can improve children's overall intellectual growth (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991).

A second 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.

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The three types of independent word identification strategies are structural analysis, phonic analysis, and contextual analysis (Johnson, 2001).

The third way in which children learn new words is through direct instruction by the teacher. Direct instruction is called for when a teacher wants students to learn particular words, for example, critical words in a short story, chapter, or article that the class is about to read (Johnson, 2001).

How Do You Teach Vocabulary?

When a teacher wants to improve vocabulary with his or her students it might seem like an overwhelming task to decide where to begin. Students are going to come to class knowing a variety of words, having many experiences, and applying strategies they know already when reading. Understanding that not all students have the same knowledge base is what makes teaching a challenge.

Johnson (2001) developed eight guidelines for expanding vocabulary through and for reading:

Guideline 1: Teachers need to devote instructional time to vocabulary growth.

Guideline 2: Wide reading should be encouraged and facilitated.

Guideline 3: Use direct instruction to teach passage critical words. Passage critical words are the words the teacher deems essential for understanding a text when the text provides insufficient clues to enable the reader to text provides insufficient clues to enable the reader to infer the meaning of the words.

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Guideline 4: Learning new words requires active involvement with the word - not passive learning of dictionary definitions (Stahl, 1986).

Guideline 5: Readers must have repeated exposures to a word to learn it well (Miller, 1996). To know a word means knowing what it means, how it fits with related words, how to pronounce it and write it, and the contexts in which it can occur.

Guideline 6: Requiring students to only write the definitions of words is not recommended.

Guideline 7: Successful vocabulary strategies help students relate new words to their own prior knowledge, as well as to other related words.

Guideline 8: Students need to develop strategies for acquiring new words independently from written and oral contexts (pp. 41 - 48).

What words should be chosen for vocabulary instruction? Many vocabulary word lists have been developed, mostly based on high frequency tabulations. Johnson (2001) has come to realize that most children, adolescents, and adults learn most of the words they know through oral and written communication - through listening and reading, speaking, and writing. He continues by adding that there are words that must be learned if students are to comprehend what they read and hear, to engage in conversations and discussions, and to write what they know and believe.

The words should come from materials and texts that students will need to know. Select important words that need to be taught so comprehension can happen. These words can

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come from a variety of sources and different subjects, but students should not be overwhelmed with too many words. May (1988) suggests choosing only two or three words from the day's reading and teaching those words in depth. He considers that a few words well taught is a far superior situation to teaching many words superficially, most of which will not be remembered anyway.

Who should choose the vocabulary words for study? Both teacher and students can be involved with the process of selecting vocabulary words for study. Research indicates that when students make their own selections, they choose words at or above their grade level a majority of the time (Blachowitz, Fisher, Costa, & Pozzi, 1993). Strategies that encourage student self-selection include a Personal Vocabulary Journal and Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy.

Personal Vocabulary Journal

A Personal Vocabulary Journal (Wood, 1994) can be used to record words that students encounter in their daily lives which are unfamiliar to them (see "Personal Vocabulary Journal", Appendix A). The format of these journals can vary, but consistency is helpful. Students record the unfamiliar word, where the word was found, what sentence it was used in, and what they think the word means. They must then find the dictionary definition and record it. The students can then compare their guess to the actual definition and write a sentence using the word in its correct context. Personal journals may also include pictures that represent the word's definition. These personal journals can be shared and discussed in small groups, with a partner, or

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with the teacher. If the words are coming from a shared text these words would generate ideas for words the class might study together.

Another version of the personal vocabulary journal is I Know What That Means! (see "I Know What That Means!", Appendix B). Students find words from their story that are new to them. They are to guess what the word means using context clues and record their guess. Then, they are to look the word up in the dictionary and compare their guess to the definition. If their guess is right, they can check the box. If not, they write what the word means on the line. The process continues while the students are reading their story.

Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy

The Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS) (Haggard, 1992) is a strategy in which students, rather than the teacher, generate the words to be explored and learned. The strategy begins with selecting words. Students are asked to go back through the assigned reading and identify one word that they think should be studied. The teacher also selects a word. Each student or group of students along with the teacher nominates a word to be studied. As the word is recorded, it is defined and the reasons for choosing the word are given. After the list is completed, the list of words must be narrowed down. This is accomplished by eliminating duplications, words already known, or words children do not wish to learn at that time. Follow-up activities such as matching exercises, word searches, or word puzzles are used to enable children to refine and extend the meanings of the

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words on the final list (Searfoss, Readence, & Mallette, 2001).

What subject should I start with? Your focus in vocabulary instruction might begin with a single subject and then you might broaden your focus to include more subjects. When I began my project I wanted to focus on reading vocabulary. I was using a basal for my reading instruction and I wanted to see improvement with my student's knowledge of the reading vocabulary. I knew that understanding the vocabulary words for each story was a key to comprehending the story. Later, I began applying vocabulary strategies to both science and social studies.

Do the students have an anchor or prior knowledge of the new words? If they have had prior experience with the word, you should utilize that knowledge in teaching the word by building a bridge between what the children know and what they have to learn (Searfoss, Readence, & Mallette, 2001). Some strategies that help build on prior knowledge include Semantic Mapping, K-W-L chart, Semantic Feature Analysis, and List-Group-Label.

Semantic Mapping

Semantic Mapping (Heimlich & Pittelman, 1986) was a common strategy that I began using with my students (see "Semantic Mapping", Appendix C). I would select the word or topic for an upcoming story or unit and place it in the middle of the web. Students were then asked to contribute to the discussion of the word/topic by adding related words and categories to the map. One example of this strategy was when we were going to read a play in our reading basal that

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involved a mystery. The topic in the middle of the web was mystery and the students then began brainstorming words they thought about when they heard the word mystery including detective, clues, pictures, magnifying glass, a problem, something could be missing, etc. The students were actively involved with the process of relating to the topic using their prior knowledge. It was informative to discuss what they already knew about a mystery.

Semantic Mapping has been found to effectively improve both children's recall of taught words and their understanding of passages containing taught words in a number of different circumstances (Johnson, Toms-Bronowski, & Pittelman, 1982; Johnson, Pittelman, Toms-Bronowski, & Levin, 1984; Margosein, Pascarella, & Pflaum, 1982).

K-W-L

The K-W-L (Ogle, 1986) is another strategy that I implemented with my students prior to reading a story and then completed after reading a story (see "K-W-L", Appendix D). First, the story topic was presented and the the students were asked what they already knew about the topic. The list of what we know (K) was recorded together as a group on large chart paper or sometimes each student would complete his or her own K-W-L chart. Next, the students were asked what they wanted to find out about during our unit or story about the topic. This was also recorded on the K-W-L chart under what we want (W) to find out. The final element of the chart, what we learned (L) and still need to learn, was completed by the students after the story was read or during our unit of study.

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I found this strategy a great tool for introducing and incorporating vocabulary words. Before reading a story in our basal about a whale we completed a K-W-L chart about whales. During our discussion about what we know one student thought whales ate some small things that are in the water. I questioned the class to see if we anyone knew what those small shrimp-like creatures are called that live in the water. Another student told the class they were called "plankton". This was a key vocabulary word that now could be added to our chart and become a part of our words to know for this story.

Semantic Feature Analysis

Semantic Feature Analysis (Johnson & Pearson, 1978) is another strategy that involves the use of prior knowledge (see "Semantic Feature Analysis", Appendix E). This strategy uses a grid instead of a map to graphically display relationships between words and their features or characteristics. You begin by adding the words from a similar concept down the left hand side. Across the top, add features or characteristics about the words. For example, when my class began an ocean unit I listed the names of ocean animals down the left hand side and features about the animals across the top including warm-blooded, cold-blooded, scales, fins, flippers, lays eggs, etc. Next, the students are encouraged to add more features or characteristics to the chart. The students then discuss each word and decide if it is an example of the feature or characteristic. The grid is then completed using plus signs if the word does include the feature, or a question mark if the students are not sure.

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The semantic feature analysis chart can be studied again after the students have read the text or their knowledge grows throughout the unit. My class did review the chart after our ocean unit and discovered some plus and minus signs that they would like to change. I found this strategy most helpful when we were reading nonfiction stories in our basal and I also used this strategy in other science units and social studies units.

List-Group-Label

Taba (1967) is given the credit for developing the vocabulary strategy called List-Group-Label, which encourages students to categorize their thoughts about new words (see "List-Group-Label", Appendix F).

The procedure for List-Group-Label begins with having the class brainstorm a list of things that comes to their mind on the topic to be studied. The teacher may also choose to introduce terms for the class. The second step is to group the words into categories either as a class or in small groups. The final step is to have the class label the groups to indicate the shared relationship with the words. Students must be able to justify why these words were grouped together and why the label fits. Following the List-Group-Label activity the students may read the selection or complete the unit of study about the topic. It is then important to look at the previously created lists, add any new words and review the groups and labels related to the topic. This will reinforce prior knowledge as well as increase the students' knowledge about the topic.

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What happens when students have little prior knowledge or experiences with a word or when it is more technical in nature? This is when teacher-directed instruction is essential for comprehension to happen. Some strategies that help with instruction include Contextual Redefinition, PAVE Map, and Possible Sentences.

Contextual Redefinition

Contextual Redefinition (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1998) provides teachers with a format to communicate to children the importance of context in ascertaining meaning. The use of context enables children to make more informed predictions about meanings of words in print and to monitor those predictions. Context is necessary for dealing with multi meaning words, word connotations, and other nuances of meaning inherent in language (Anderson & Nagy, 1991). By using Contextual Redefinition, you can teach children the power of context in helping them to develop word meanings and effectively process print (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1998).

Contextual Redefinition begins with a selection of unfamiliar words. The students are given the words in isolation and asked to offer definitions for each word. Next, write a sentence containing the unfamiliar word. This sentence may come from the text or if the text doesn't have appropriate clues create one. Again, children should offer guesses about each word's meaning. Finally, children look up the word in a dictionary to verify the guesses (Searfoss, Readence, & Mallette, 2001).

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PAVE Map

Another strategy called PAVE Map (Prediction, Association, Verification, Evaluation), developed by Bannon, Fisher, Pozzi, and Wessel (1990), helps students to cross-check a word's meaning with the context in which it appeared. This strategy is also useful for words with multiple meanings.

The procedure of PAVE Map is similar to Contextual Redefinition. A target word is selected from the the reading material. Students copy the sentence in which the word appears. Students print the target word again and predict the meaning. The dictionary is used to verify the meaning. Then the students write the dictionary definition. If the predicted definition is incorrect, students rewrite a sentence using the correct dictionary definition. Lastly, students sketch a representational image of the target word to help them remember its meaning (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlogn, 2000).

Possible Sentences

Possible Sentences (Moore & Moore, 1986) is another strategy that focuses on key concept vocabulary and context clues. The teacher makes a list of key words and works with the students to come up with short definitions of each word. Next, the students think of sentences that contain at least two of the key words that might appear in the selection they are about to read. When the students have finished the reading, have the students look again at the sentences on the board. Encourage them to discuss whether each sentence could or could not be possible. If a sentence is not accurate,

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have the students discuss how to rewrite it to make it an accurate statement (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2000).

What Do I Do After The Words Have Been Taught?

The goal of vocabulary learning is to have students store the meanings of words in their long-term memory, and to store the kind of information about a word that is useful in understanding text (Carroll, 1964). Important words are introduced to children before they read. They use these words in their reading and any follow-up discussion. They then further practice with these words in an extension activity. Extension activities should give children the opportunity to think about the meanings of the vocabulary words they are learning (Searfoss, Readence, & Mallette, 2001). Some examples of extension activities include matching exercises, word searches, and word puzzles.

Matching Exercises

To reinforce long-term memory learning of vocabulary definitions I have implemented matching exercises. Once a week, I draw ten vocabulary words out of a pail and create a matching quiz. I provide the ten words and fifteen definitions on the quiz. The students then match the words with their correct definitions.

The other matching exercise I provide for the students is included in our vocabulary center. The game is Concentration. The vocabulary words we are studying with our reading story of the week are written on index cards along with their definitions on separate cards. The cards are mixed-up and placed upside down on the table. The students then attempt to match the vocabulary words with their

Vocabulary: A Building Block definitions. To vary this activity I also create matching games using the vocabulary words and their synonyms.

Word Searches

Word searches are another exercise used to reinforce definitions of vocabulary words (see "Word Search", Appendix G). The words are randomly written into the puzzle to be found by the students. The word's definition is given and the students must find the word in the puzzle that goes with it. The students are reading the definition and then searching for the vocabulary word in the puzzle that matches with that definition. These word searches have been created by the students in my class and by me.

Crossword Puzzles

Crossword puzzles are also created using the vocabulary definitions as the clues and the vocabulary words are written into the appropriate boxes. These puzzles are also created by the students and by me.

Conclusions

When beginning this project with my students I would have never expected to learn so much as a teacher. From all of my reading and research, I learned that vocabulary is an essential part of teaching. In all of the curriculum areas, knowledge of vocabulary is important. With word understanding, comprehension grows and so does the student's knowledge.

Vocabulary development activities not only include many opportunities for students to be actively involved with reading a variety of books, but, through vocabulary instruction, the teacher directly teaches important words and

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strategies to help students understand what they are reading. Through the use of a variety of strategies I observed how different strategies can help students learn and grow in their knowledge. This project allowed me to grow as a teacher because I now know a variety of strategies that work effectively with students that I might not have tried without doing my research for this project. I also feel more confident that I am meeting the needs of my students when it comes to learning vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction is now an area I feel is worth the time and effort needed to help students. I am very glad I chose vocabulary instruction as my project.

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Appendix A
Personal Vocabulary Journal

My new word is _____

I found it _____

The sentence it was used in

I think it means _____

The dictionary definition

My sentence is

My picture

I Know What That Means!

I Know What That Means!

Directions:

1. Find a word from your story that is new to you.
2. Read the sentence where you found the word. Try to guess what the word means.
3. Record your guess
4. Look the word up in the dictionary. If your guess was right, put a check on the line. If not, write what the word means on the line.
5. Continue to find words in your story that are new to you.

1. New word _____

My guess

My guess was right! _____

This is what it means

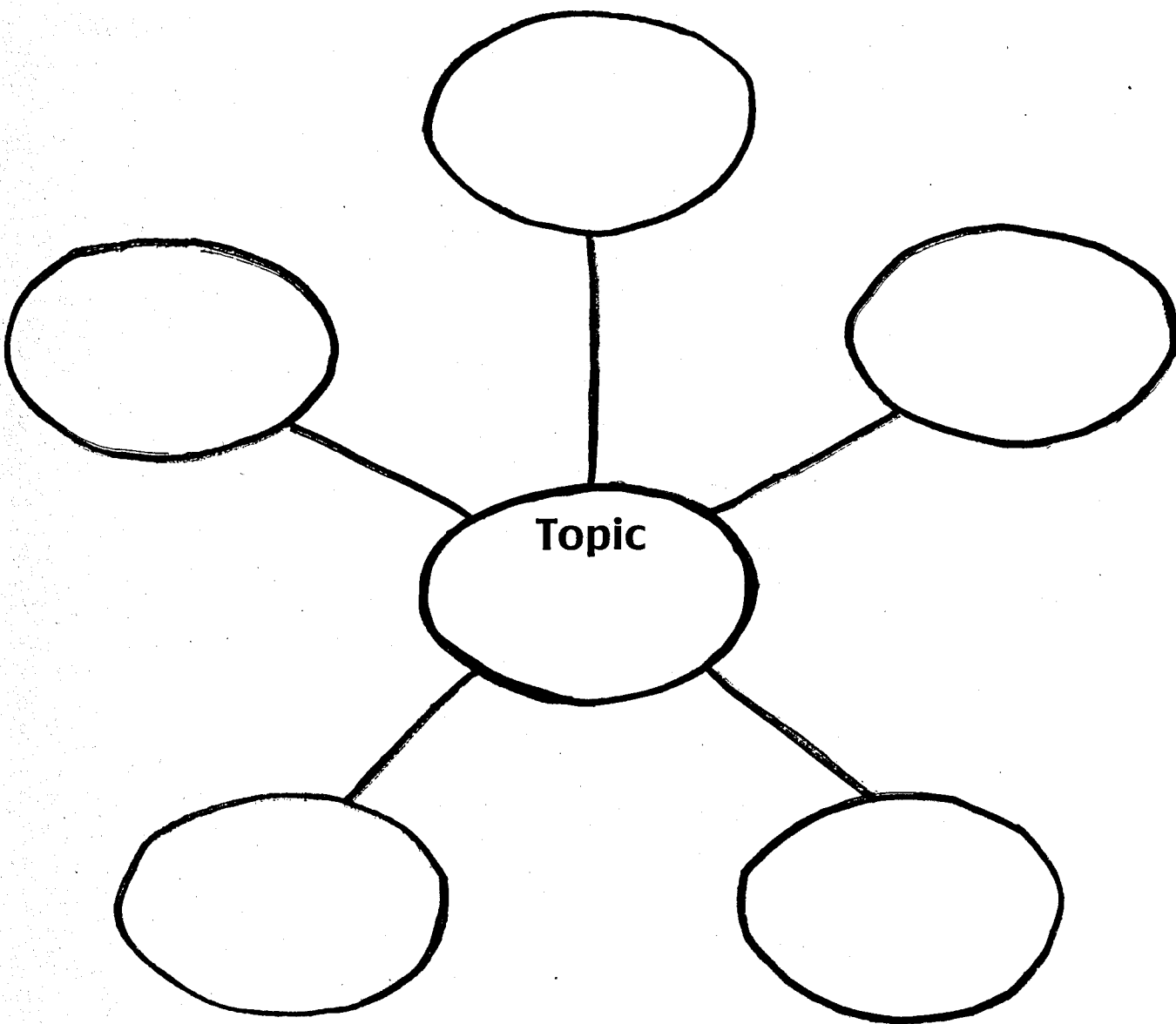
1. New word _____

My guess

My guess was right! _____

This is what it means

Appendix C
Semantic Mapping



Appendix D
K-W-L

K-W-L Chart

K What we know	W What we want to know	L What we learned

Semantic Feature Analysis

Appendix E
Semantic Feature Analysis

Summary

What conclusions can you draw by studying the information on the chart?

Appendix F
List-Group-Label

Topic _____

List all of the terms that come to your mind about the topic.

Group and Label the terms

After reading, these are the new words I added to the groups

Now look at all of the groups and labels to see if they need to be changed.

