

# Bewitched by Words

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*Editor's note: This article continues a discussion of vocabulary instruction that began in the last issue of Strategram (Vol. 18, No. 2, January 2006).*

Effective communication is essential in today's world. The front page of any newspaper—or the CNN home page, for today's Web-savvy news junkies—offers all the evidence necessary to underscore its importance. And the foundation of effective communication is the ability to use words deftly and with precision to represent ideas and concepts.

"It's not just words. It's also the beauty, the wonder of how we put those words together," says Peggy Graving-Reyes, a SIM Professional Developer from California.

Without understanding and using words appropriately, our ability to communicate is impaired and our chances of miscommunication—potentially resulting in conflict—increase. Thus, the purposes behind vocabulary instruction—helping students to become interested in words, increasing students' awareness of words in and beyond school, and instilling an insatiable curiosity about words—are essential instructional goals.

### **On the alert**

Speaking during the 2005 International SIM Conference, Peggy described a recent experience in her own continuing vocabulary development, illustrating how being alert to new words is a skill to foster in adulthood, too.

Leafing through a magazine while awaiting her turn to see a doctor, she came across a word with which she was unfamiliar: metrosexual. Curious, she read on and began constructing a novice-level understanding of the word through the context of the article.

"It basically, at least at that level of my understanding, is men who enjoy pampering themselves," she explains.

Peggy, who has taught general education and special education at the elementary, secondary, and college levels, found her interest piqued. Now alert for other instances in which the word was used, she began to see and hear "metrosexual" in places where she might never have noticed it previously.

### **Resource**

*Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan. (2002) New York: Guilford Press

The book is full of suggested activities to reinforce instruction and offers examples for early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The authors explain their theory, provide examples, give opportunities for practice, and incorporate feedback, all in a clear, friendly package.



“I’m listening to the news; they use the word metrosexual. I’m reading the newspaper the next day; they use the word metrosexual,” she says. “That word was there before I read it in the doctor’s office. It was being used before I read it in that magazine, but I was not alert. Once it came on my radar screen, then I continued to see it and hear it.”

What’s more, each new use of the word deepened her understanding of its meaning.

Peggy used this story to set the stage for a conference session on vocabulary instruction. She and husband Jeff Reyes, a high school science teacher who is also a SIM Professional Developer, reviewed some of the findings in *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan and made connections between the recommendations in the book and elements of the Strategic Instruction Model that support effective vocabulary development.

**Which words?**

Developing effective vocabulary instruction begins with selecting the words to teach. *Bringing Words to Life* distinguishes among three levels of words. Tier 1 words are the basic words that most students already know and use in everyday situations. Tier 2 words are high-frequency words that mature language users can apply in many subject areas and in general conversations. Tier 3 words are not used frequently and are often limited to specific content areas.

To get the most bang for your instructional time, focus on Tier 2 words. These are the words that will most enrich students’ vocabulary, equipping them with precise words to convey their ideas effectively in meaningful conversations.

“This is a gray area,” states Peggy. “There are not guidelines that say, ‘This absolutely is a Tier 2 word.’ It’s the knowledge base

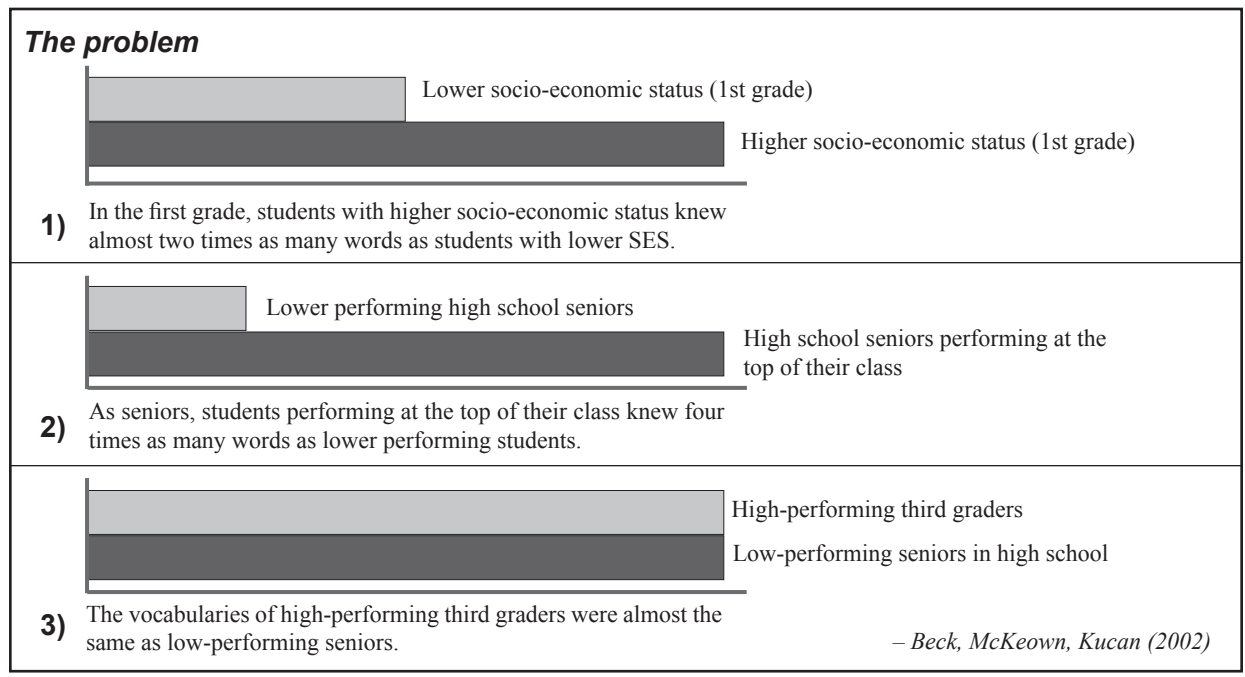
of your students; students are your barometer.”

Choose words that give students a more precise means of expressing a concept with which they are already familiar, Peggy says. An example given in the book is selecting to teach the meaning of “merchant” because students probably already know “salesperson” or “clerk,” and it is a word that will be used in their social studies classes.

“If they have that alternative way to express it, what you are trying to do then is to give them a more precise word that they can use...for better communication,” she says.

**How many?**

Related to the question of which words to teach is how many words should be taught. Beck and her colleagues recommend teaching five to 10 new words a week, always judging your students’ ability to master the new information.



For high performing students, 10 is probably reasonable, Peggy says. For struggling students, five may be appropriate. Sometimes, teachers can narrow their lists by concentrating on words that have real-world connections for their students.

“If we can’t teach all the words, we need to have a method of selecting words,” Peggy says. “The Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 system helps us make those types of instructional decisions.”

**SIM connection**

When it comes to the “how to” of vocabulary instruction, the interventions of the Strategic Instruction Model and the process outlined in *Bringing Words to Life*

are a perfect match.

One part of the authors’ instructional process involves helping students understand what a word is and what it is not, Jeff says.

“What we’ve found is that if a student can not only tell us what it is, but they can also relate to what it’s not, then they have a pretty clear understanding,” he says.

Sound familiar? How about this advice regarding examples and nonexamples: Both are necessary for students to develop a clear understanding of a word’s meaning.

The *Concept Mastery Routine’s* Concept Diagram, in particular, dovetails beautifully with the process recommended by Beck and her colleagues. The diagram leads

students to discuss characteristics of a concept that are always present, sometimes present, and never present and then to provide examples and nonexamples of the concept. Other Content Enhancement Routines—*Concept Anchoring* and *Clarifying*, for example—also incorporate these instructional elements.

Finally, Jeff says, put the definition of the word into everyday language students can understand, an element of many Content Enhancement Routines. The Anchoring Table, for example, provides space for students to write their understanding of the new concept, as does the Concept Diagram when it encourages tying down a definition.

**Working with words**

We use words all the time, but most of us stick to the ones with which we feel comfortable. If we need to add new words to our vocabularies, we need time to practice them more than once to develop that comfort level. Our students are no different. Beck et al. suggest that every word selected for vocabulary study be used eight to 10 times per week. Here, Peggy Grav-

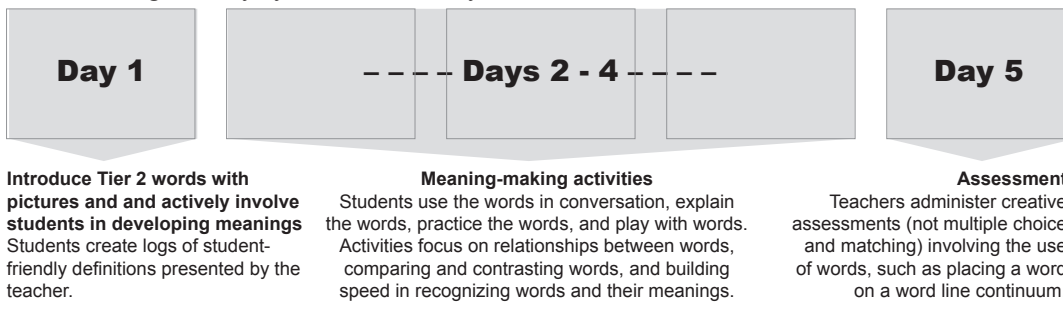
ing-Reyes and Jeff Reyes highlight a few of their favorite ways from *Bringing Words to Life* to immediately engage students in vocabulary instruction and to help them become comfortable using new vocabulary words.

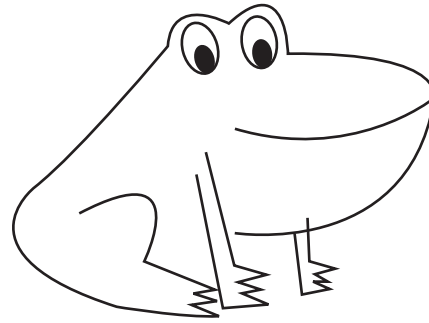
*Fostering alertness.* “We know that words change over time, that language is constantly evolving and changing. It’s growing. It’s living,” says Peggy. Help your

students develop an alertness for new words. Encourage them to notice situations and the context in which words are used outside of class. Ask them to collect and bring in unfamiliar words they have found in newspapers or heard adults say (“G”randmother-rated, Peggy cautions).

*(Continued on page 7)*

Multiple exposures to a new word—such as Peggy’s experience with metrosexual—are important to develop greater depth of understanding of meaning. In their research, Beck and colleagues used the following five-day cycle for vocabulary instruction:





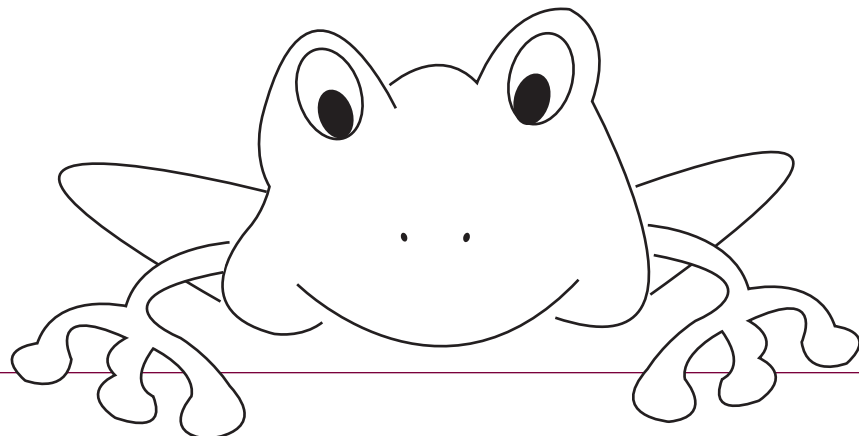
# Dr. DISSECT



SIM Professional Developer Joan Nejezchleb of Texas is known in schools as “Dr. DISSECT,” only in part because of her hard-to-pronounce name. Of all the SIM strategies, the *Word Identification Strategy*—DISSECT—is her favorite.

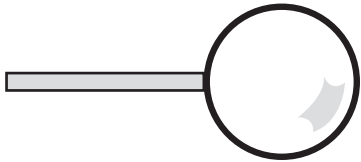
“DISSECT is one of those strategies that gets in your blood, and I couldn’t teach if somebody told me I couldn’t DISSECT words,” she says.

Here, Joan offers a collection of interactive activities, tips, and resources to make words come to life through *Word Identification* instruction. She presented these ideas during the 2005 International SIM Conference in a session she called “DISSECT Words, Not Frogs.”



## DISSECT TIPS & ACTIVITIES

- Grab a pair of bottle-thick Harry Potter glasses or a magnifying glass to help students “focus” on their words.



- Use a Koosh® ball during verbal rehearsal. Toss it to one student at a time. The student catching the ball gets to say the next step.
- Regarding teaching students Rule 3 of the Rules of Twos and Threes (*When two different vowels are together, try making both of the vowel sounds. If this does not work, try pronouncing them together using only one of the vowel sounds*): “I call those monsters and make a really big deal about it and make them special. Guess what happens? They go looking for those kinds of words,” Joan says. “I also have my prefixes and suffixes in cards that I put in a pocket chart. When we get to the monster vowels, I make those in red so they will stand out.”



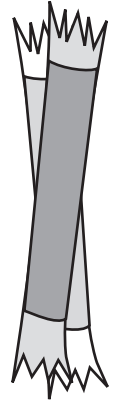
- Use sticky notes to play relay games and make words in

color. Sticky notes also come in handy when students come to words they don’t know while reading textbooks.

- Show students how to quickly DISSECT a word in their textbooks using their pointer fingers. The left finger starts at the beginning of the word looking for a prefix. If the student finds a prefix, his or her finger covers it while the student says the prefix. The right finger starts at the end of the word looking for a suffix and repeats the same step. Finally, students will have the stem. If they can’t pronounce it, once again the fingers can move following the Rules of Twos and Threes.
- A new student to the strategy might enjoy using a transparency overhead cut to fit his or her book. The student can then DISSECT the word quickly using an AV marker.
- Because the title of Joan’s session was “DISSECT Words Not Frogs,” she used different sizes of gummy frogs to represent root words, prefixes, and suffixes. “Other times, I have used a trail mix containing any three items,” she says. “The trick is to have one item the students will not really want to eat. The least-liked item is the stem (base or root) word. As a group, you can add prefixes and suffixes and then eat them. Let students play with them and

place them in different arrangements to get a feel for how parts of words go together. This is a good activity for younger students.”

- Joan often begins instruction in this strategy with two unwrapped candy bars. “Together, we discuss what we see and compare the two pieces of candy,” she says. “Then we make guesses about what type of candy bars we have. To figure this out, we must DISSECT or take the candy bars apart to examine the inside very closely, just like you need to do with words.”
- Joan is selective about the prefixes and suffixes she helps her students master, choosing those that will have the greatest relevance at any one time. “I usually select prefixes and suffixes that are related to the subject material that we are studying. I have found that it is extremely important to have the students recognize these in print as quickly as possible,” she says.



### White board activities

During her session, Joan guided a group of teachers and professional developers through a series of activities to model how to ground *Word Identification*

## White board activities

instruction in texts students are reading. Below is a description of the steps and examples she used.

Adapt this review to your own classroom by choosing words from the texts your students are reading. Make sure every student has a white board, a dry erase marker, and a tissue to use as an eraser. These activities are designed for maximum participation.

“I am able to see what everybody is doing, and I am making everybody individually accountable,” Joan says of these technique.

### **Materials**

Construct inexpensive white boards for each student using the following materials:

- One 8½- by 11-inch piece of heavy white poster board for each student
- Plastic sleeve sheet protectors (available at office supply stores)

How to assemble: Insert one piece of poster board into each plastic sleeve. Joan says the inexpensive sheet protectors work best for this activity. Choose sheet protectors designed for use in three-ring binders so students can keep their white boards in their notebooks.

—Cathy Spriggs, SIM Professional Developer in California,

designed this method of constructing individual white boards

### **Getting started**

In this example, Joan has chosen “department” from the first chapter of a novel. Here are some of the activities she devised to help students DISSECT “department.”

1. Write “part” on your white board. “That is our base word, our root word, our stem word,” says Joan. “I call them all three because every series uses something different.”
2. Now write “de” in front of “part.”
3. Isolate the prefix
4. Say the stem
5. What’s your word? Depart.

### **Adding on**

“I want to grow this word,” says Joan. “What suffix can I put on this?”

1. Write a suffix on the white board.
2. Show the white board to your neighbor.
3. Now hold up the white board and show it to me.

Looking around the room, Joan sees department, departure, departs, departed, departing.

### **More DISSECTION**

Joan asks participants to write the word “departmental” on their white boards.

“Let’s see if you can DISSECT it,” she says. “I’m going to tell you I see one prefix and two suffixes.”

1. Turn to your neighbors and see whether your DISSECTION looks the same.
2. Hold your white boards up and show them to me.

### **Between the lines**

Next, Joan asks participants to write the prefix “a” and the suffix “ment” on the white board with a space between the two.

Participants then fill in the space to make a word.

Some of the words seen around the room are agreement, apartment, amendment, alignment, amusement, and assignment. Joan’s word is “abasement.”

### **Resources**

- Balderdash, the game from Mattel
- *Weighty Word Book* by Janet Stevens, ISBN: 0-9627979-0-1  
“She was a high school English teacher who wanted to get her kids prepared for SAT words, so she made stories out of all of them,” says Joan.
- *Sniglets for Kids* by Rich Hall, ISBN: 0-89954-397-9
- Online thesaurus: [www.visualthesaurus.com](http://www.visualthesaurus.com)

**Working with Words (continued from page 3)**

*Word associations.* After presenting a number of words with their explanations, ask students to draw relationships between the new words and their meanings. An example provided in the book is “Which word goes with crook?” (Answer: accomplice).

*Have you ever?* This process helps students create a place in their vocabulary for new words. Introduce the new word as part of a question: “Have you ever urged someone to help you?” This approach relates the word to something students have done themselves and puts it in a context they understand.

*Idea completions.* Start a sentence using the target word and have students complete it. If they can finish the sentence appropriately, they probably know what the word means.

*Be dramatic.* Give your students a set of words and a brief description of a situation. Ask them to use the words to write a short script. “Kids absolutely love coming up with these little 30-second, 45-second dramatic plays with the words,” shares Peggy.

Overall, Jeff and Peggy say, be the catalyst that activates your students’ vocabulary

antennae! Raise their awareness of new vocabulary in their environment. Model your excitement in learning new words, model your passion for trying new words in your vocabulary, and share your all-time favorite words.

As Beck and her colleagues state, “...an enormously important orientation is that the classroom verbal environment be one that makes mature language a visible part of everyday practice. Teachers, through their own choice of words, should strive to have students become accustomed to hearing words they do not know, words that are beyond their current knowledge...that stretch their expectations of language.”

Research has probably not measured the value of the teacher who is “bewitched” by words and shares this fascination with her students, Jeff and Peggy say. However, these researchers have agreed that “the teacher who is alert to opportunities for using sophisticated, interesting, and precise language is probably the most important element in such an environment.”

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