Dare to differentiate: Vocabulary strategies for all students

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Lesenia arrives to the classroom nearly an hour before the first bell rings. She has completed all of her homework perfectly, organized her desk in preparation for the day’s lessons and helps herself to different learning center activities to occupy herself while she awaits the start of school.

José shows up ten minutes late to class every day. He never has a pencil, and he does not seem to have the ability to sit in his seat for periods beyond eight minutes.

Anthony completes math exercises well ahead of his classmates, but he struggles during reading time and usually acts up.

Welcome to Ms. Kwon’s fourth grade classroom. It could be just about any classroom in America. One of the epiphanies teachers reach within their first week of teaching is how, no matter what, every classroom is filled with students of mixed abilities and interests. Every student is different. This is the challenge good teachers face: how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of every student. Differentiating instruction is especially critical in enhancing students’ reading aptitudes and attitudes.

What is differentiated instruction?
Teachers need to keep in mind that instruction begins where the students are, not at the front of the curriculum guide (Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiated instruction permits all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks and outcomes that are tailored to students’ needs (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003). Differentiated instruction is an approach, not any single strategy.

In aiding students’ progress in reading (particularly in their vocabulary and, ultimately, comprehension development), teachers can create classrooms that meet state and federal standards and maintain high student expectations by supporting all students’ learning modalities and differentiating through content, activities (process) and product, based on students’ readiness, interests, profiles of learning and environments. Brassell and Rasinski (2008) describe a simple mnemonic trick to help teachers always keep differentiation in mind: each student is RIPE for learning when the teacher uses his/her thinking CAP. “RIPE” stands for Readiness, Interests, Profiles of Learning and Environments; “CAP” stands for Content, Activities (process) and Product.

Why is vocabulary instruction important?
Who are the more successful vocabulary teachers: optimists or pessimists? The answer is “optimists,” and the reason is that optimists keep in mind that if at first they do not succeed they always try again. Optimistic vocabulary teachers display a passion for teaching that infects their students. We need plenty of optimistic and passionate teachers in our classrooms if we want our students to enhance their vocabulary development.

But that is only half the battle. If teachers want to make their vocabulary lessons “stick,” teachers have to create rich and engaging activities that attract the enthusiasm of their students. Good vocabulary teachers need to have “weapons of mass instruction,” a variety of research-based strategies for their vocabulary-teaching arsenals.

different strokes for different folks. Some students learn vocabulary best by playing games, and others prefer drills. Teachers need to realize that they have to create classrooms that provide students with a variety of different vocabulary development activities to accommodate all students' learning interests and needs.

Although research has shown that vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in students' literacy development, many teachers devote hardly any class time at all to vocabulary instruction (Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). Moreover, teachers that do devote time to vocabulary instruction often use strategies that fail to increase students' vocabulary and comprehension abilities (see reviews in Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002; Nagy, 1988). Finally, Graves (2000) and his colleagues (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002) have advocated broader classroom vocabulary programs for students that: (1) facilitate wide reading, (2) teach individual words, (3) provide word-learning strategies, and (4) foster word consciousness.

**What does differentiated vocabulary instruction look like?**
A thorough examination of various vocabulary enhancement strategies is detailed in Dare to Differentiate: Vocabulary Strategies for All Students (Brassell, 2009). This article is meant to provide teachers with a broad starting point on the road to their students' vocabulary development. Without sacrificing a large part of time reserved for other curriculum, teachers in an urban Southern California elementary school showed how they facilitate vocabulary growth by utilizing a variety of differentiated instructional strategies with their highly culturally and linguistically diverse students.

**Word Sorts** (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 1996; Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 1995; Gunning, 2003) is an instructional strategy used to help students see the generative nature of words. Students "sort" words written and chosen by the teacher on individual cards into groups based on commonalities, relationships and/or other criteria ("closed sort"), or students select categories for sorting their words ("open sort"). The strategy is used to: (1) assist students in learning the relationships among words and how to categorize words based on those relationships; (2) activate and build on students' prior knowledge of words; and (3) allow students to understand recurring patterns in words (e.g., rhyming words, number of syllables, etc.).

Tamiko Hiroshi's fourth graders were studying a science unit on recycling. She had introduced a variety of books to the class, and in the third day of her unit she selected a couple of passages from the book Fifty Simple Things Kids Can Do To Save The Earth (Earthworks Group & Monte, 1990). These passages continued to focus on the three R's she had been teaching her class: recycle, reuse and reduce. She selected words from the passages that she believed were unfamiliar to most of her students. As a number of words contained similar prefixes, she asked students to work in pairs to categorize each word based on its prefix (closed sort). Knowing that this would be a fairly simple activity for her fourth graders, Mrs. Hiroshi then asked her students to create their own categories for words (open sort).

After students completed both the closed sort and open sort, Mrs. Hiroshi asked them to share their work with the class. Students explained why they placed words in various categories for the closed sort, and they told the class why they had created the categories they had for the open sort. Mrs. Hiroshi allowed students to make any changes they deemed necessary for their final word sorts. Figure 1 shows the target science vocabulary words that Mrs. Hiroshi selected for the class, as well as examples of two student groups' closed and open word sorts. As the Figure demonstrates, open word sorts particularly lend themselves to product differentiation, as some of Mrs. Hiroshi's students chose to categorize words by "parts of speech" while others categorized words by their "number of syllables."

Word Sorts allow students to classify groups of words as they see fit. It is one of the favorite vocabulary activities offered by many teachers, especially elementary school teachers. Pat Thompson, a second grade teacher, says that she uses Word Sorts with her students as a way of seeing how their minds operate. "I use it as an assessment, but not in the way some 'test-crazy' folks think," she says. "When my students sort their words, it allows me to ask them about their thought process... (which) helps me determine new ways to present information to certain students in ways that are meaningful to them." Like Thompson, many teachers use Word Sorts as a way of relating students' prior knowledge to new concepts, making target vocabulary words much more comprehensible to students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1. Word Sorts by Mrs. Hiroshi's Fourth Graders</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Science Vocabulary Words (selected by Mrs. Hiroshi)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disabled</td>
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<tr>
<td>discover</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 | Feature Articles
Vocab-O-Grams (Barr & Johnson, 1997; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002), also known as “Predict-O-Grams,” allow students to make predictions about how authors use particular words to tell a story. Vocab-O-Grams are used with a charting process that asks students to organize vocabulary in relationship to the structure of the selection. This strategy is used to: (1) allow students to go beyond the definition of a word and consider its application in text, and (2) encourage students to form predictions about a selection based on vocabulary words.

Deron McGinnis planned to read the West African folktale Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears (Aardema & Dillon, 1975) to his third graders. He knew that many of the words in the story would be new to his students, so he chose a list of new vocabulary words for the class to review before reading the story.

He wrote the list on the overhead projector and asked students to discuss what they knew about the words. Next, he passed out Vocab-O-Gram handouts to the class. Mr. McGinnis organized students into groups of four students and asked each group to predict where each vocabulary word could be found as it related to the story structure.

Figure 2. Vocab-O-Gram by Mr. McGinnis's Third Graders

"Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears"

New Vocabulary Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syndrome</th>
<th>whining</th>
<th>iguana</th>
<th>plotting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>burrow</td>
<td>feared</td>
<td>killed</td>
<td>reeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>council</td>
<td>gathered</td>
<td>mosquito</td>
<td>sticks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farmer</td>
<td>On a farm</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Setting

Which words tell you about when and where the story took place?

Characters

Which words tell you about the characters in the story (their feelings, thoughts, appearance)?

Problem/Goal

Which words describe the problem or goal?

Action

Which words tell you what might happen?

Resolution

Which words tell you how the story might end?

What question(s) do you have?

Why don't the animals kill the mosquitoes?

Mystery words: council, plotting
As an example, he asked students to place the word "village" in the most appropriate category. A group answered "setting," and Mr. McGinnis then asked students to think of a prediction they could make about a story with the word "village." A student predicted that such a story would take place in a small town. Mr. McGinnis told students that they would be reading *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears,* and they had to guess where their new vocabulary words fit in the story (characters, setting, problem/goal, action or resolution). If a group could not decide what category to place a word under, they could place the word in the mystery word category.

Students worked in groups for about ten minutes, placing words in categories and making predictions about the story. Mr. McGinnis asked groups to share their predictions and to explain how they came up with them, and then he asked each student to write at least one question about the story, based on previous predictions. He read aloud the story and discussed with students whether their predictions were accurate. Students shared their thoughts about the story and about different ways the author used the words. Their feedback is listed in Figure 2.

Students enjoy predicting how they think stories are going to turn out, and Vocab-O-Grams allow students not only to predict what they think is going to happen in a story but which words to focus on, as well. Teachers comment that the strength in Vocab-O-Grams seems to be in allowing students to work in pairs or small groups to test their different predictions with peers before sharing them with the entire class. Sal Parker asks his sixth graders to come up with different ways to present their Vocab-O-Grams to the entire class. For example, Mr. Parker's students have created skits, facilitated talk shows, performed puppet shows, shot short videos and even created their own WebQuests. When using Vocab-O-Grams, Mr. Parker points out, teachers can differentiate content, process, product—or a combination of all three.

**Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy** (Haggard, 1986; Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2001; Ruddell, 1992), also known as Vocabulary Self-Selection (VSS), is an instructional strategy that places the responsibility for learning words on the students. It is a group activity in which students each bring one or two words to the attention of the group that they believe the group should learn. Students, rather than the teacher, generate the majority of words to be explored and learned. Students use their own interest and prior knowledge to enhance vocabulary growth. The strategy is used to: (1) help students generate vocabulary words to be explored and learned by focusing on words that are important to them, (2) simulate word learning that occurs naturally in students' lives, and (3) guide students in becoming independent word learners by capitalizing on their own experiences.

Joyce Tan had been working with her first graders on a thematic unit emphasizing the importance and responsibility of good citizenship. Her students had been reading a number of stories about how to respect themselves and others, play fairly and behave like model citizens. Today, the class had read the book *Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters from Obedience School* (Teague, 2002), and afterward Ms. Tan asked her students to arrange themselves in groups of four.

She told students that she would read the story again more slowly and asked each group to try and find one word from the story that they would like to learn more about. She told her students that the word could be a word that they did not understand very well, a word

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Student Definition*</th>
<th>Rationale **</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>canine</td>
<td>dog</td>
<td>&quot;The police have K-9 units. Those are the cops with dogs.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prison</td>
<td>jail</td>
<td>&quot;A prison is where you go when you are bad and can't get along with other people so they put you alone by yourself.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussed</td>
<td>said; talked about</td>
<td>&quot;We're discussing now!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prevented</td>
<td>stopped</td>
<td>&quot;When you prevent something it means you stop it from happening. That's why they say not to have fires in the forest because they can cause bigger fires... so you can prevent big fires by not making little fires.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refused</td>
<td>say &quot;no&quot; won't do</td>
<td>&quot;It's like when Munro (another story students read) told his parents he wouldn't take a bath or eat his dinner. He refused to.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shocking</td>
<td>surprise</td>
<td>&quot;Something shocks you when you don't know it's going to happen.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ms. Tan asks students to double-check their definitions by comparing them with definitions found in their dictionaries.
** Ms. Tan does not write students' rationale for choosing a word on the overhead projector/chalkboard. Rather, she asks students to tell her why they chose a word. It is written here to demonstrate how students feel about certain words.
that they think they needed to know, or a word they were curious to know more about. The most important thing to remember, Ms. Tan emphasized, was for each group to nominate a word, define the word by looking at how the author used it in the story, and tell the class why they thought it was important that the class learned the word.

Some groups came up with a number of words, and Ms. Tan said that was all right because different groups might nominate the same words for the class vocabulary list. After allowing students about five minutes to discuss their nominations, Ms. Tan asked representatives from each group to share with the class the words they chose. She wrote each word on the overhead projector and asked the class to define each word. She also asked students to share whatever they knew about a word.

When she asked students to defend why they chose a word, students discussed why their word was important to know. Once the entire class had shared their words, definitions and rationales, Ms. Tan rewrote the key vocabulary words on the board with the definitions decided by the class. She passed out “Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy” sheets and asked students to copy the words and definitions from the class list on the overhead (see Figure 3). Ms. Tan informed the class that they could refer to their new words when they wrote stories later in the day. She also told the class that she would use their vocabulary list to include in future word finds and word jumbles.

Freedom of choice among students is the key to the Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy. By allowing students to select the words that they are interested in learning more about, teachers are empowering and encouraging their students to take active interest in their own learning. Frederica Pimmel cautions that some students may require some extra guidance in their own learning. According to Mrs. Pimmel, “By modeling to students terms of what types of words students need to focus on. According to Mrs. Pimmel, “By modeling to students terms of what types of words students need to focus on. According to Mrs. Pimmel, “By modeling to students terms of what types of words students need to focus on. According to Mrs. Pimmel, “By modeling to students terms of what types of words students need to focus on.

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Final thoughts
Learning vocabulary can be fun with the right attitude. There are all sorts of ways for teachers to engage their students in acquiring more vocabulary. Introducing students to great books is always the best idea. Games are fantastic. It is necessary for more teachers to realize, though, how they can differentiate the content, process and/or product of any given lesson in order to meet the needs and readiness levels for all of their students.

The strategies discussed in this article are all utilized as part of a number of vocabulary development activities offered at one school, in addition to increased access to books. It should be noted that all teachers at this school considered their extensive classroom library reading resources critical in attracting their students’ interests in vocabulary activities. Again, a more comprehensive list of strategies can be found in Dare to Differentiate: Vocabulary Strategies for All Students (Brassell, 2009). If teachers want to build students’ word knowledge without sacrificing a significant portion of their instructional time, they need to practice more enticing vocabulary-building activities that focus on the specific needs of each individual child. In that way all students may succeed.

References
Graves, M.F., & Watts-Taffe, S. (2002). The place of word consciousness in a research-based vocabulary
program. In A. Farstrup & S.J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (3rd ed.), (pp. 140-165). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.


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In the picture with Richard is Elizabeth Widdifield, Rhode Island state delegate and chairperson of the Helen A. Murphy Memorial Teaching Mini-Grant.