



The World Around the Word: How Word Voyage Builds Word Curiosity

Abigail W. Konopasky, Ph.D.

Studying facts in isolation is both boring and unproductive (Politano & Paquin, 2000). This is why my 7th-grade social studies teacher's quest to have us all memorize President Reagan's cabinet without any *stories about* that cabinet was doomed to failure. The one figure I do remember (James Watt) is only stuck in my memory because of a story I made up about his name and light bulbs.

The study of words can also head in this unproductive direction: we give students lists to memorize, test them, and then move on, leaving behind no true and lasting *learning*. Word Voyage's 'Word Origins and History' component provides the stories *behind* the words, helping new vocabulary to 'stick' and building curiosity about **the world around the word**.

Slowing Down and Taking It All In

According to the National Institute for Literacy (2008):

“Successful readers are *mentally active* readers.”

These mentally active readers place what they read in *context*, connecting it to other knowledge and experiences and analyzing the parts of the words they don't know. In other words, they are *curious* about concepts and about *words*.

Word Voyage promotes this curiosity by asking students to slow down and consider the history of words. In searching for borrowings, students practice *metalinguistic knowledge*, a key literacy element (Martello, 2001). This process of looking at *related words* helps students 'see the forest for the trees': they become aware of the 'Englishness' of a word like *intangible* by seeing it in another form, *intangibilis*. As students continue to work with Word Voyage, they will begin to develop a *global linguistic perspective*, connecting the words they read to the words in French, Latin, Spanish, German and other world languages.

Extension Activity: Coordinate Word Voyage lists with school language teachers and have students keep ‘word portfolios’ of English words and the borrowings from the language they are studying.

“Deep Processing”

According to Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), some of the most successful vocabulary instruction programs “involved students in deep processing of the words’ meanings.” (quoted in Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007) This kind of “robust vocabulary instruction” (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002) asks students to thoughtfully interact with word meanings, rather than seeing them as static. Word Voyage’s innovative approach to word meaning gives students the opportunity to compare and analyze. For example the word *auspicious* comes from the Latin borrowing *auspicium*, meaning:

divination by observing the flight of birds

Word Voyage asks the student to compare this ancient meaning with the modern English definition:

fortunate; indicative of a successful outcome

The comparison above helps students to begin to understand the underlying meaning of the word. In looking at varying definitions for a single historical item, students will compare, contrast, and begin to make their *own* meanings. And, as Stahl and Fairbanks discovered, there is a side benefit: students’ reading comprehension will improve!

Extension Activity: Give students access to multiple dictionaries and have them compare a wide range of definitions for a single word. Then have them write their *own* definition.

Stepping Out of the Vacuum

If looking at borrowings asks, “*Who* is this word related to?” and the definition comparison asks, “*What* does this word mean?”, then looking at the English period asks, “*When* is this word?”. Going back to the concept of *mentally active readers*, investigating the *when* of a word is critical. Students often think of ‘English’ as a static, monolithic object; it is, was and always has been and all words are created equal. Word Voyage’s focus on the historical context of a word helps students to see English as the living, changing, complex language that it is. The student is asked:

In what Period of English did this word enter the language?

This exercise helps students experience the shifting nature of English. Not only did English (and its predecessors) adopt words from other languages, these adoptions correlate with *geo-political events*! Much like the conquests of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs have brought with them an influx of words like *e-mail*, *ipod* and *cyberspace*, the Norman

conquest in the year 1066 brought new words like *enter*, *opinion* and *perspective*. This awareness of the fluidity of English can give students a sense of *empowerment*: as living speakers of this language, they too possess the authority to use and change its words.

Extension Activity: Just below the ceiling, string a piece of yarn or line across the classroom. Have students mark out several feet for every major English period (Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, Late Modern English). Every time they learn a new word, have them write the modern word, its 'birthday' (first attested date) and its older English form on a card and hang it in the appropriate section. This will create a visual model of both how *long* our language family has been developing and how *concentrated* most words are in several key centuries around several key events.

In Conclusion

By asking students to slow down and think carefully about language, to interact with the meaning of words, and to place words in a historical context, Word Voyage gives students the tools to tell their own story about language. This not only gives students *access* to the 'world behind the word', it engenders *intellectual curiosity* about that world that will take them far beyond mere word learning into the rest of their scholarly endeavors.

About the Author

Abigail Konopasky received her Ph.D. in Linguistics and Slavic Linguistics from Princeton University in 2001. After completing a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Duke University, she went on to a tenure-track position in the English Department at the University of New Orleans. Throughout her career she has been interested in literacy and access to literacy resources, teaching writing, ESL, and Women's Studies in addition to Linguistics and Discourse Theory. She is currently the curriculum consultant for Word Voyage, teaching literacy skills through the Literacy Council of Prince George's County, MD, teaching communications at the University of Maryland University College, and establishing an innovative 'GED Bridge Program' through the Maryland-based nonprofit, TradePrep.

References

- Beck, I. McKeown, M. & Kucan, L. (2002). Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kieffer, M. & Lesaux, N. (2007). Breaking down words to build meaning: Morphology, vocabulary, and reading comprehension in the urban classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 61, 134-144.
- Martello, J. (2001). Talk about Writing: Metalinguistic Awareness in Beginning Writers. Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, June.
- National Institute for Literacy (2008). Key Literacy Component: Text Comprehension. Retrieved from <http://www.adlit.org/article/27882> on February 17th, 2011.
- Politano, C. & Paquin, J. (2000). Brain-Based Learning with Class. Winnipeg, MB: Portage & Main Press.
- Stahl, S. & Fairbanks, M. (1986). The effects of vocabulary instruction: A model-based meta-analysis. Review of Educational Research, 56, 72-110.