The Word Up Project
Multisensory Instruction to Build Vocabulary Proficiency and Reading Skills

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The Word Up Project

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The Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is critical to successful reading comprehension and academic achievement (National Reading Panel, 2000; Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995a). A student’s ability to make sense of grade level texts is dependent upon having an adequate vocabulary (Baumann & Kaméenui, 1991; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). When students encounter texts with too many unfamiliar or challenging words, they have difficulty both comprehending that text and developing the skills and strategies they need to grow as readers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In fact, failure in school can be linked to deficiencies in vocabulary growth (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995a). Without an adequate vocabulary, a student’s ability to comprehend texts and to make adequate academic progress can both be severely compromised.

“Vocabulary knowledge is important because it encompasses all the words we must know to access our background knowledge, express our ideas and communicate effectively, and learn about new concepts.”

-- Sedita, 2005, pp. 2-5
The Need for Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

In order to progress at a pace that allows them to continue to work at grade level, students must learn thousands of new words each year. On average, students should add 2,000 to 3,000 new words a year to their reading vocabularies in order to successfully meet the increasing rigor and complexities of grade-level texts and tasks (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy & Herman, 1987). Learning 3,000 words per year necessitates the acquisition of about eight new words per day (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995b).

Incidental encounters with words have proven to be effective in helping students to acquire the thousands of words they should be learning annually (Smith, 1997). Reading appears to be the primary source of incidental vocabulary acquisition (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Baumann & Kaméenui, 1991). Students also acquire new words by engaging in listening, speaking, and writing activities.

Research suggests, however, that while words can be learned incidentally, intentional, explicit instruction plays an important role in students’ achievement (McKeown & Beck, 1988; National Reading Panel, 2000). While incidental vocabulary acquisition is important, many students need purposeful and explicit vocabulary instruction to keep up with their peers. In fact, in its analysis of the research on vocabulary instruction, the National Reading Panel (2000) found that all students can benefit from a combination of incidental encounters and explicit instruction. According to McKeown and Beck (1988), explicit instruction is actually more effective and more efficient than incidental learning for the acquisition of specific vocabulary words. The convergence of research findings – that vocabulary knowledge is essential to comprehension, reading growth, and achievement; that the number of words students need for success is large; that incidental word learning alone is not sufficient; and, that words can effectively be taught using explicit instructional
strategies – together point to a clear need for vocabulary instruction at all grade levels and for all students.

Important to note is that while all students will benefit from explicit vocabulary instruction, for certain student groups, this instruction is essential for their success. Research has documented the disparity between the vocabularies of socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged student populations (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Hart & Risley, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Without intentional and meaningful intervention, the disparity in vocabulary knowledge between these two student groups only increases over time (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995b). English language learners also benefit a great deal from explicit vocabulary instruction. While English language learners tend to acquire social language vocabulary and skills through incidental social interactions and conversations, the acquisition of an academic vocabulary requires explicit vocabulary instruction (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006a). A third group that benefits a great deal from explicit vocabulary instruction in order not to fall further behind is struggling readers. Struggling readers make larger and faster achievement gains with the help of explicit vocabulary instruction. Struggling readers often have weaknesses in the areas of fluency, comprehension, and word analysis that make it more difficult for them to learn new words and to make sense of texts. Explicit vocabulary instruction can help them grow as readers in ways that incidental vocabulary learning cannot (Sedita, 2005).

The Purpose for this Report

Incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction into the curriculum in a way that is exciting and engaging for students, as well as instructionally effective is one of the biggest challenges that educators face. The Word Up Project was created to meet this challenge.

In order to develop a program that was optimally engaging and effective for students, The Word Up Project was designed to align with best practice as identified by educational experts and academic research. The purpose of this report is to share the research and theory that supports the content and instructional approaches upon which The Word Up Project was created.

Specifically, the report is organized in four main sections around the research that supports the program’s:

- Instructional approaches (discussed in Section 1)
Activities for teaching and learning vocabulary (discussed in Section 2)
Focus on student engagement and motivation (discussed in Section 3)
Features that meet the needs of diverse learners (discussed in Section 4)

Section I: Using Effective Instructional Approaches

Effective programs use instructional approaches that have been proven effective by research. A program that supports effective instruction for all students provides explicit instruction, integrates skills to make learning more meaningful, and uses predictable routines in the classroom to support student learning. The Word Up Project vocabulary program provides explicit vocabulary instruction that is grounded in these instructional approaches. The program provides support for teachers to incorporate these effective instructional approaches in their own classrooms.

Explicit Instruction

To be most effective, reading comprehension instruction must support students, directly and explicitly, with how to use the strategies needed to comprehend a text (Hollingsworth & Woodward, 1993). Students with reading difficulties can benefit particularly from explicit instruction in comprehension strategies (Nelson & Manset-Williamson, 2006), but poor and high achievers alike have been shown to benefit from explicit instruction (Van Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005). Similarly, explicit instruction in vocabulary skills and strategies – how to understand new words – is essential to effective vocabulary instruction. Explicit instruction has been shown to be effective in increasing students’ word knowledge and has been demonstrated to be an effective instructional strategy.

To be effective, explicit instruction must meet several criteria. Rather than just mentioning a skill or providing a word definition, teachers model or provide direct explanation. Teachers then provide opportunities for guided practice. And, finally, teachers encourage the application of skills and strategies to new contexts (Pearson & Dole, 1987). This is the framework followed by The Word Up Project. Teachers introduce words in an interesting context, provide multiple and varied opportunities for practice understanding and using the words, and encourage students to apply their new understandings in creative ways.

This framework not only results in student acquisition of the vocabulary at hand, but provides students with a framework for learning other new words they will encounter. As Nagy and Anderson (1984) point out, the total number of words which students must learn is so vast that educators cannot hope to directly instruct students in each
individual word. Rather, educators can focus on explicitly teaching students the skills and strategies they can apply to learn unfamiliar words.

**Integrated Skills**

Integrating skills within and across the disciplines is particularly important in English language arts classrooms because of the interconnectedness of reading and writing, and of speaking and listening. In addition, because we read to learn across content areas and we write to communicate information across disciplines, integrating literacy learning across curricular areas makes sense. Cognitive scientists have demonstrated that instruction is more readily learned and retained when skills are integrated, allowing students to create pathways of learning and remembering in their minds. Research supports the idea that connections between reading and writing are present at the narrower word level (word recognition, vocabulary, and spelling) and at the larger text level (comprehension and composition) (Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, Graham, & Richards, 2002). Research also suggests that a thematically integrated classroom, in which students have an opportunity to learn and practice words in varied contexts, facilitates word learning and the development of independent word learning skills (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995b).

In *The Word Up Project* students integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking as they engage in diverse word-learning activities. Because the music lyrics included in the program touch on diverse topics, from Muhammad Ali, to dreams, to socio-economic disparities, to the first Puerto Rican Congresswoman, to a battle of the American Revolution, students integrate content-area knowledge from varied disciplines into their language study as a natural part of *The Word Up Project*.

**Predictable Routines**

Providing predictable routines for students supports learning. Not only does student behavior improve, but students also show greater engagement with learning and achieve at higher levels when they can predict the instructional routines in a classroom (Kern & Clemens, 2007). Predictability in *The Word Up Project* facilitates learning for all students. Each unit of the program is structured in the same way so that students know what to expect and can have confidence in their abilities to proceed from one step to the next.

Predictability in the instructional routine is particularly important for students with learning difficulties. For these students, the ability to accurately predict what instructional activities will occur, how long they will last, and what outcomes are
expected is linked to a decreased level of problem behaviors (Flannery & O’Neill, 1995). Consistency makes it more likely that the structures of effective instruction can be put into place and followed by students (Scott, Park, Swain-Bradway, & Landers, 2007).

*The Word Up Project* student worktext repeats the same sequence of nine lesson elements in each unit. This provides students with a predictable instructional routine, which in turn facilitates word learning and student achievement.
Section 2: Teaching and Learning Vocabulary

The ultimate goal of reading instruction is to develop the student’s ability to comprehend increasingly complex texts independently – in both academic and real-world settings. In order to accomplish this goal, instruction must support students with the acquisition of the depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge required for the automatic access of meanings in the texts that they encounter. Extensive research has been conducted that focuses on the teaching and learning of vocabulary, and this research has clear implications for instruction.

In 1987 the National Reading Panel was established and given the task of reviewing the evidence-based research on reading instruction. According to the National Reading Panel’s (2000) review of the research:

“...more encounters [with the same words] yielded better results than fewer encounters for word knowledge, for context interpretation, and for story comprehension.”
-- McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985, p. 532

... vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly. Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important. Learning in rich contexts, incidental learning, and use of computer technology all enhance the acquisition of vocabulary. Direct instruction should include task restructuring as necessary and should actively engage the student.

The following research-based elements of effective vocabulary instruction are fundamental to the content and structure of The Word Up Project. Each is discussed in more detail in the following section of this report, and accompanied by program examples and connections. Effective vocabulary instruction:

- provides students with multiple and varied exposures to words;
- provides frequent instruction in vocabulary;
- teaches word definitions;
- shows words in context;
- guides students’ use of within-text context clues to learn new words;
- categorizes and makes connections between words;
- has students practice making sense of new text in which the words are embedded;
enables students to apply their new knowledge in writing; and
helps students learn to analyze the structure of words.

Multiple and Varied Exposures to Words

One of the consistent findings across research on vocabulary acquisition is the need for multiple exposures to words. Words must be encountered a number of times before true learning occurs (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Graves, 2006; Kolich, 1988; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). The need for teachers to provide students with multiple exposures to the same word is one of the three principles that Stahl (1986) recommends, and is further supported by other research in the field (Baumann & Kaméenui, 1991; National Reading Panel, 2000). Providing multiple exposures to the same word allows for a deeper understanding of words; students can be led to an understanding of words that encompasses the multiple meanings, uses, and connotations of those words (Beck & McKeown, 1991; McKeown & Beck, 1988). This deeper understanding of words has the greatest likelihood of being retained when students are able to practice in multiple and varied learning contexts (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995b). For English language learners, providing multiple exposures in varied instructional contexts is essential. For these students, it is particularly important that vocabulary instruction incorporate oral, reading, and writing activities (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006a).

A study conducted by Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki (1984) suggests that a combination of informal teaching, which involves exposing students to the words before beginning explicit instruction on the words’ meanings, followed by more than one contextual presentation of the word, strongly affects vocabulary learning. The research of Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2002) supports these findings. Their study compared students who received rich, varied instruction in vocabulary with students who had been provided no vocabulary instruction and students who had been provided only traditional instruction based on definitions alone; “the pattern of results was that students who received rich, frequent instruction did better on a variety of measures” (77-78).
Different approaches to vocabulary learning have been demonstrated to be effective, and using these varied instructional strategies in concert enables students to develop deep understandings of words. According to Graves (2006), effective vocabulary instruction involves students in active and deep processing of the word. Instruction should allow students to engage in activities that lead them to consider the word’s meaning, relate that meaning to information stored in memory, and work with the word in creative ways.

**Frequent Instruction in Vocabulary**

In addition to teaching words in different ways, the frequency of instruction in vocabulary is important (National Reading Panel, 2000; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Providing many opportunities for practice has been shown to be an effective instructional technique to support word learning, particularly among students with learning disabilities (Swanson, 1999; Swanson & Hoskyn, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2000).

Not only does repetition and frequency in vocabulary instruction lead to better understanding and retention of vocabulary, but it can also contribute to the acquisition of other literacy skills. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) cite frequency as an essential element to vocabulary instruction that is effective in improving reading comprehension. Other
research suggests that repetition in vocabulary instruction can support reading fluency (Jenkins et al., 1984; Topping & Paul, 1999).
The Definitional Approach
Stahl (1986) recommended that teachers use both a definitional and a contextual approach to vocabulary instruction. Other researchers have reiterated the effectiveness of this combined approach (Baumann & Kamēenui, 1991), noting that a definitional approach alone leads to greater vocabulary acquisition than incidental learning alone. Nagy (1988) and Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) concur, contending that successful vocabulary programs teach word definitions as one of many approaches to word learning.

A definitional approach alone, however, has not been demonstrated by research to support deep word learning. Providing students with word definitions and no other opportunities to interact with the words may result in a shallow understanding of words and an inability to use the words in new contexts (Nagy, 1988). For this reason, it is important that a definitional approach be combined with other varied approaches to word learning. According to Graves (2006), effective vocabulary instruction “includes both definitional and contextual information” (27).
THE WORD UP PROJECT

CONNECTION

Each unit in The Word Up Project includes a “Words Defined” section where students can find definitions of vocabulary words in the unit and read each of the words in a sentence before engaging in other activities using the words.

1C Words Defined

Below you’ll find each vocabulary word that was used in the song. Each word is followed by the part of speech, a simple definition and a meaningful sentence. Some words will also have synonyms, antonyms and other forms of the word listed.

1. anarchy (noun) a state of lawlessness, confusion or disorder

The crowd erupted into a state of anarchy during the concert.
Synonyms: chaos, disorder, turmoil
Other forms: The anarchist (noun) lit the garbage heap on fire and soon the whole street was ablaze.

Quincy was an ardent fan of any sports related books or authors.
Synonyms: impassioned, fervent, zealous

3. augment (verb) to add to

Larry’s dad agreed to augment his allowance by two dollars a week.
Synonyms: to boost, increase, enhance
Antonyms: to decrease, reduce

4. blásé (adj) unimpressed and indifferent

We all thought Ken would be really excited about the prestigious award he received, but instead he was very blásé about the whole thing.
Synonyms: bored, disenchanted
Antonyms: eager, enthusiastic

5. desolate (adj) without any people; dismal and devastated

We were shipwrecked and washed up on the most desolate island.
Other forms: Desolate is also a verb meaning “to devastate,” as in: Several mean boys tried to desolate my sand castle on the beach by running through it. Something that is destroyed is an example of desolation (noun).

From The Word Up Project, Level Blue
The Contextual Approach

Effective vocabulary instruction incorporates multiple approaches to word learning. In addition to the definitional approach, words should be taught in context (Stahl, 1986; Baumann & Kameeniu, 1991; Fischer, 1994). According to Nagy (1988), “a combination of definitional and contextual approaches is more effective than either approach in isolation” (8).

One of the central findings of the National Reading Panel (2000) was that “learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning” (4-27). Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2002) support this idea, asserting that effective vocabulary instruction is rich in contexts that encourage active student involvement in using and thinking about words and their meanings.

The rationale for this is clear. Words can be understood at many levels. A shallow understanding may mean that students understand only a basic definition or a connotation of a word -- for example, that it suggests something good or unpleasant. A deeper understanding might include a richer knowledge of the multiple meanings and uses of the word, the denotations and connotations of the word, the figurative and literal interpretations of the word, and an ability to use the word precisely to fit specific tasks, audience needs, and purposes (Anderson & Nagy, 1991). For students to acquire these kinds of deeper understandings of words, students must be exposed to these words in rich and varied contexts. A definitional approach alone would be too limited to build these rich understandings.
THE WORD UP PROJECT

CONNECTION

The Word Up Project embeds target vocabulary words into the lyrics of hip hop songs, thus presenting the words in a meaningful and engaging context. This is just one example of the way in which the program presents each unit’s vocabulary in context.

From The Word Up Project, Level Green
Using Within-Text Context Clues to Learn New Words

Within-text context clues are like scaffolds that support students in making meaning as they read texts. In their research, Menon and Hiebert (2005) found that “texts that have been crafted to incorporate multiple text- and word-level scaffolds can support the transition into independent word solving and passage reading, especially for children who are challenged in learning to read” (37).

Providing students with texts that surround words with context is one important way of supporting student comprehension. In the same way, though, that implicit vocabulary instruction is not as effective as implicit instruction combined with explicit instruction, students will best learn how to use context to support meaning if they are provided with explicit instruction in how to do so. According to McKeown and Beck (2004), “Attention given to context clues can be most beneficial if variations in contexts are discussed and students are exposed to models of how to integrate information from context to derive word meanings” (26).

By teaching students how to use context clues to derive word meanings, educators are providing students with an essential skill to become an independent word learner. Indeed, Anderson and Nagy (1991) cite this as the most important strategy to support word learners.
Activities like this one in *The Word Up Project* provide opportunities for students to use in-text context clues to decide on words’ meanings.

From *The Word Up Project*, Level Green

**Categorizing and Making Connections between Words**

To retain new words and be able to incorporate them into a working vocabulary, students need to understand how new words “fit in” with the words that they already know. This instructional strategy – of categorizing and connecting words – is supported by the influential work of Ausubel (1963). Ausubel’s work articulated the role of connecting new ideas to already established schema in order to support long-term and meaningful learning (Kauchak & Eggen, 2006).

Schema theory supports the notion that for students to fully understand and retain words, they must be able to place those words within a structure of the words that they already know and understand. Effective vocabulary instruction assists students in
making connections by relating what students already know about the “new” word and showing how this word connects to other words that students know (Durkin, 2003).

In their work, Griswold, Gelzheiser, and Shepherd (1987) found that students who had richer vocabularies were able to acquire words more efficiently than those students with poorer vocabularies. This research suggests that a teacher’s explicit attention to making associations and semantic connections between words can help students activate the prior knowledge needed to gain new vocabulary. In addition, research on cognition suggests that new information must be integrated with existing information to be deeply learned and retained. One method that supports this strategic integration of new vocabulary is to systematically base new word understandings on the understandings of previously learned words (Baker, Simmons, & Kaméenui, 1995b).
**THE WORD UP PROJECT**  
**CONNECTION**

Activities like this one in *The Word Up Project* helps students make connections between words.

### 7F Draw the Relationships

In each grouping of eight words below, draw straight lines between the synonyms (words that mean similar things) and squiggly lines between any antonyms (words that mean nearly opposite things). Every word should have at least one line connected to it. Some may have more.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>allot</th>
<th>assimilate</th>
<th>standard</th>
<th>divide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>adapt</td>
<td>bountiful</td>
<td>conventional</td>
<td>huge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>deceptive</td>
<td>foster</td>
<td>implant</td>
<td>instill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>honest</td>
<td>safe place</td>
<td>haven</td>
<td>neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>restrain</td>
<td>occurrence</td>
<td>ornate</td>
<td>shackle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>memoir</td>
<td>plain</td>
<td>phenomenon</td>
<td>autobiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sublime</td>
<td>theme</td>
<td>fall back</td>
<td>unifying idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>amazing</td>
<td>bountiful</td>
<td>not enough</td>
<td>surpass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From *The Word Up Project*, Level Blue

**Using Words for Text Comprehension**

Texts are made up of words, and without a sufficient and growing body of vocabulary, students cannot understand the words they encounter in grade-level texts. Reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge are strongly connected (Baumann &

The implication of Wixson’s (1986) research in this area supports the connection between word knowledge and text comprehension: “The implication of these results is that preteaching unfamiliar vocabulary can have a direct effect on students’ understanding of specific ideas within a text” (327).

THE WORD UP PROJECT

CONNECTION

In each unit, The Word Up Project includes a reading comprehension passage in which the vocabulary words from the unit are embedded, thus providing students with the opportunity to use their new word understandings to help them make sense of a text.

3G Understanding What You Read

Read the passage below. Then answer the questions.

Apartheid was a system of separating or segregating races from one another in the country of South Africa. It was an institution that existed for many years, since it was backed by laws. To provide some context chronologically, it started in the year 1948, and it was finally dissolved in the year 1994, when the South African government held its first truly democratic elections.

In all elections, it was a system based on prejudice, in which the white minority tried to control the black majority. Blacks were only allowed to vote in remote regions called Bantustans. Many black people lived and worked in the “white” regions in the country, which had better land for farming. Still, they were still not able to vote there. Black citizens could only vote in the “black” regions.

There were other obstacles for blacks in South Africa as well. The education provided in all “black” schools was worse than the education provided in all “white” schools. Without a voice in the government or the right to vote, black South Africans could not transform the system of Apartheid into something fair for everyone. If they spoke up against Apartheid then they would be breaking the law and would be prosecuted for it.

Breaking the law is exactly what Nelson Mandela did in an attempt to bring about change. At first he tried to end Apartheid through peaceful negotiations, but when that failed, violence erupted. He was prosecuted and sentenced to 27 years in prison for his actions. He did not give up, however, on his dream to end Apartheid in South Africa. After his release in the year 1990, he again took on a peaceful approach for ending this unfair system. After three long years of peaceful negotiations, Nelson Mandela finally achieved his goal and Apartheid ended. Now all South Africans, regardless of their race, could pledge their allegiance to a new integrated country and its first democratically elected President, Nelson Mandela.

From The Word Up Project, Level Green
Using Words in Writing

According to Baker, Simmons, and Kaméenui (1995b), integrating reading and writing together in the classroom facilitates reading growth and student independence in word learning. Having students engage in writing activities has been specifically identified as an effective vocabulary teaching strategy (Klesius & Searls, 1991). In addition, Nagy’s (1988) research suggests that when students are asked to think about and use words critically and creatively they are more likely to retain these words.

**THE WORD UP PROJECT**

**CONNECTION**

Activities like this one in *The Word Up Project* provide opportunities for students to use vocabulary words in writing.

**SH Thinking Creatively**

*Answer each question below. Don’t be afraid to think creatively.*

1. Why do you think a pond on a golf course is called a water hazard?

2. Who is a more prominent figure in history: Abraham Lincoln or John F. Kennedy?

3. Describe something that is monotonous in your life.

4. Microsoft named one of their computer programs Excel. Why was this a good or bad choice?

5. Describe something that makes you a unique individual.

From *The Word Up Project*, Level Green
Analyzing the Structure of Words

Like the old motto that states that giving a man a fish provides him with food for a day, while teaching him to fish provides him with food for life, the ultimate goal of vocabulary instruction is not just to teach a set of isolated words, but also to provide students with skills and strategies they can use when they encounter unfamiliar words in new contexts. The use of context clues is one such strategy. The use of structural analysis is another. According to Aronoff (1994), students’ word learning is supported by increasing their understanding of the morphological structures of words.

Providing explicit instruction in structural analysis – using roots and affixes and other word parts to understand words – has been shown to be beneficial to students:

We found that morphology [the study of the structure of words] was related to reading comprehension ..., and became more important as students grew older. Students with greater understanding of morphology also have higher reading comprehension scores when holding constant their word reading fluency. ...students’ understanding of morphology was a better predictor of reading comprehension than their vocabulary level. In addition, we found that this relationship was the same for Spanish-speaking ELLs [English-language learners] as for native English speakers in an urban setting....

The conclusion that students with greater understanding of morphology are more successful at learning academic vocabulary and comprehending text is a strong argument for including morphology instruction in language and literacy programs, especially in urban settings. (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2007, 139)
THE WORD UP PROJECT
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The Word Up Project includes a “Word Breakdown” section in each unit. Etymological and other interesting information about one of the unit’s vocabulary words are introduced here.

Word Breakdown

Though the words don’t seem similar caption is actually related to capture. They both stem from the Latin capere, meaning “to take.” To capture is to take something. Originally, when a government seized or captured your property for some reason, it would hand you a “Certificate of Caption,” to let you know why they had to repossess it. By 1789, caption was being used to mean a chapter heading or title of an article. A hundred years later, it had become “a description of an illustration or photograph.”

If you are deaf or watching TV in a restaurant with the sound off, you might want to turn on the “closed captions,” which display the text of what is being said on the TV. They are “closed” in that not all viewers see them, only those who turn the captions on. In Nas’ song “Nature Shines,” he notes that, “For those asking, I flow for TV, HBO and closed captions.”

From The Word Up Project, Level Green

Section 3: Engaging and Motivating Students

The most effective instructional approaches are those that are motivating and engaging to the learners. An empirically grounded truth about learning is that students will put in the time and energy necessary to learn if they are interested in what they are learning (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Mosenthal, 1999) and if they can relate to it (Beckwith, 1991; Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss, 1979). The Word Up Project uses hip hop music not just to capture the interest of students, but also as a way to provide a unique curriculum that aligns to students’ interests and outside-of-school competencies. Furthermore, the program’s music lyrics are thoughtfully written and include topics that are interesting, relevant, and familiar to students from a variety of cultural backgrounds.
Educational Research Institute of America

Using Hip hop Music for Instruction

A great deal of research (Alvermann, 2002; Bandura, 1993; Bean, 2000; Pajares, 1996; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997) has made it clear that students are more likely to be successful academically when they feel a sense of belonging and connection to their learning communities. Yet many students find themselves in learning situations where their interests and cultural backgrounds are ignored, or even criticized. According to Alvermann and her colleagues, “[Student] diversity, the result of individual differences and life trajectories, as well as community differences and cultural backgrounds, are too often seen as liabilities rather than as the helpful opportunities for education they can be” (Alvermann, et al., 2001, p. 6).

Certain students are more likely to feel marginalized than others. Student populations that Fritzberg (2001) describes as “non-mainstream” – ethnic minorities and those of low socioeconomic status – often feel that the subjects they study are culturally foreign to them. Hip hop, which according to Morrell & Duncan-Andrade is the “representative voice of urban youth” (2002, p. 88), when recruited as curriculum can help to engage students who often feel alienated in the classroom. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade argue that hip hop can be used in the as a cultural frame that can aid students in their understanding of material presented during classroom instruction and can also be used to align instruction with urban youth culture (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

Connecting to Students’ Prior Knowledge and Experiences

Educators have known for some time that in order for learners to make sense of new information, they must be able to make connections to their prior knowledge and experiences (Afflerbeck, 1986; Chiesi, Spilich, & Voss, 1979; Pressley, 2000; Snow & Sweet, 2003; Spires & Donley, 1998). That means that the new understandings and ideas to which students are introduced in school must be both relevant and familiar enough to them that they are able to make those essential connections. Unfortunately, according to Garth-McCullough, “American schools, their academic activities, structures, and materials primarily reflect social, historical and cultural traditions of a white, middle-class mainstream,” (2008, p. 3). Therefore, students whose experiences are not reflected in the curricula in most American classrooms are at an academic disadvantage (Lane, 2006).

“Recruiting hip hop as curriculum affords students the opportunity to grow as literate individuals.”

-- Hallman, 2009, p. 39

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The lyrics to *The Word Up Project* hip hop songs were written to reflect the lives, interests, and cultural backgrounds of all students – including those who are not considered to be “mainstream.” Students are therefore able to rely on their own experiences and understandings to make sense of the stories that the lyrics tell and the messages that they send – as well as the vocabulary words that have embedded in the lyrics.

Section 4: Meeting the Needs of All Learners

All teachers face the challenge of meeting the instructional needs of a wide range of students. *The Word Up Project* was designed to support teachers with this challenge. The program’s various components can help teachers meet the unique needs of culturally diverse students, struggling readers, and English language learners.

Culturally Diverse Learners

The growing cultural diversity in today’s classrooms demands that teachers be knowledgeable, responsive, and well-prepared to work with a diverse student population. To meet the needs of students from all backgrounds, teachers must use a wide range of research-based strategies that support students’ learning styles and preferences, and that build on students’ prior knowledge and experiences (Bennett, 1995). *The Word Up Project*’s use of hip hop music, and the program’s focus on connecting to what students already know, which are described above, are both characteristics of the program that will support the needs of culturally diverse groups of students. In addition to these program features, *The Word Up Project*’s use of both visual and audio learning components supports the needs of students with different learning modalities.

“Learning modalities” refers to the primary way we take in information to help us learn. Commonly, researchers identify auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modalities (Barbe & Swassing, 1979). Howard Gardner (1983) established another way of grouping modalities. He asserts that there are several modalities or intelligences that link to our individual styles. These include verbal-linguistic (sensitivity to the meaning and order of words) and musical (sensitivity to pitch, melody, rhythm, and tone). Using programs and approaches that appeal to multiple student learning modalities and intelligences will help all students perform well (Kellough & Kellough, 2003).

Research suggests that students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds have different learning modalities (Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993; Hale-Benson, 1982). Sims (1988) found that underachieving African-American students, significantly more
than white students, preferred sound and auditory teaching. Dunn (1995) contends that students who are underachieving and at risk benefit from visual resources that are reinforced by audio resources. Because of its inclusion of both auditory and visual components, The Word Up Project, is a particularly effective program for auditory and visual learners, as well as learners whose strengths, according to Gardner’s (1983) multiple intelligences, are verbal-linguistic or musical.

**Struggling Readers**

In addition to the program’s emphasis on supporting readers to improve their vocabularies, The Word Up Project also includes additional support for struggling readers. Both the auditory component of the program, as well as reading comprehension questions that follow a reading passage in each unit provide additional benefits for struggling readers.

Research suggests that audio support while reading can improve students’ comprehension of the text (Balajthy, 2005). Following along in the text while at the same time listening to someone else read the words can help readers make sense of what they are reading. Furthermore, audio recording of texts can serve as models for reading by providing inflection, tone, voice, dialect, pacing, pausing, silence, and different voices (Baskin & Harris, 1995; Carbo, 1996). Struggling readers often have difficulty with fluency, which can make reading very laborious. Audio recordings can provide the model that these readers need to improve their fluency and ultimately their comprehension. Evidence also suggests that audio support while reading can help improve readers’ stamina and concentration (Hecker et al., 2002).

Whether they read or listen to texts, or do both at the same time, readers must use a variety of reading strategies, such as drawing conclusions and making inferences, in order to make sense of what they read. Readers who struggle to comprehend texts often have trouble using such strategies (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). One obstacle for many readers is that they are not always given the opportunity to move beyond literal recall of texts in the classroom because of teachers’ reliance on literal questions (Barnes, 1975). In order to improve their abilities to answer more complex questions about texts, students need to be given multiple opportunities to do so. The questions following the The Word Up Project reading passages were developed specifically with

“For comprehension, some readers need to see words, and hear them simultaneously.”
the intent of providing all readers, but particularly those readers who need more practice, with the opportunity to answer questions that move beyond literal recall of the text.

**THE WORD UP PROJECT CONNECTION**

The comprehension questions that follow *The Word Up Project* “Understanding What You Read” passages include questions that involve more than the mere recall of ideas from the text. These questions require students to make inferences and think more critically about what they have read.

1. According to the text, Cody was talented when it came to
(A) cooking
(B) feeding cats
(C) mowing lawns
(D) typing

2. After reading the passage, I can infer that
(A) Cody’s next job will be as a lifeguard
(B) Cody’s business will definitely succeed
(C) Cody likes animals
(D) Cody surfs the Internet all the time

(A) Cody lives outside the city.
(B) Cody will clean your dog for extra money.
(C) Cody is omniscient.
(D) Cody is ready to work hard.

4. The main character of this story felt
(A) remorse after starting his business
(B) confident after starting his business
(C) persecuted after starting his business
(D) eligible after starting his business

5. What is the main idea of this reading passage?
(A) Pets are more important to take care of than people.
(B) Kids should all start their own business.
(C) It is possible to start a business that you are good at and enjoy.
(D) All kids are bored during summer break.

From *The Word Up Project*, Level Green
English Language Learners

Researchers agree that insufficient vocabulary knowledge is a critical problem for English language learners (August & Shanahan, 2006; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Students need to know a wide range of words to make sense of the instruction that they receive and understand the texts they will read in school. Many English language learners who come to school with limited English-language background find that vocabulary is their most frequently encountered obstacle in attempting to understand classroom reading assignments (August & Hakuta, 1997; Carlo et al., 2004; Jiménez, 1994). The Word Up Project was designed to support English language learners both through the design of the instruction and the selection of important words for learning.

As mentioned above, English language learners benefit from multiple exposures to words in varied instructional contexts. It is particularly important that their vocabulary instruction incorporate oral, reading, and writing activities (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006a). These are all characteristics of The Word Up Project. The program’s use of music is also beneficial to English language learners. According to Paquette and Rieg (2008), music can be used to effectively support English language learners with vocabulary acquisition because songs are an effective way not only to help English language learners acquire new vocabulary, but also to teach the pronunciation of those words. The Word Up Project program’s use of music to teach vocabulary will help English language learners not only develop their vocabularies, but also improve their English pronunciation.

Another feature of The Word Up Project program that supports all students, but particularly English language learners is the program’s tendency to focus on tier 2. (Response to Intervention, a federally prescribed approach to providing services and interventions to students who struggle with learning, often uses a model that includes three “tiers” of intervention. Within this model, different vocabulary has been deemed appropriate for each tier.) Tier 2 words represent the more sophisticated vocabulary of written texts. Mature language users use such words with regularity, but students encounter them less frequently as listeners in social situations. As a result, these words are unknown to many students. Because of their lack of redundancy in oral

“Regardless of the musical form and despite a teacher’s level of musical training, the value of enhancing literacy instruction through music is vital in today’s classrooms. This is particularly true for English language learners.”

-- Paquette & Rieg, 2008, p. 227
language, tier 2 words present challenges to students who primarily meet them in print. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) advocate a focus on tier 2 words for explicit vocabulary instruction. Because these words are increasingly prominent in the written texts that students read as they move through school, adding them to one’s vocabulary will have a high impact on reading comprehension. According to Cummins (1979), there are clear differences in English language learners’ acquisition of conversational language and academic language. Children typically develop informal “playground” talk sooner and more easily than they develop skills to cope with the cognitively demanding language they are expected to understand and use to complete academic tasks (Corson, 2001; Cummins, 2000; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). The Word Up Project program’s focus on tier 2 words that represent school language, therefore, is ideal for English language learners. Through this program, students can learn the words they need to know for on-grade, academic success.

Conclusion: The Research Support for The Word Up Project

Incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction into the curriculum in a way that is exciting and engaging for students, as well as instructionally effective, is a challenge. The Word Up Project was designed, using research-based principles, to meet this challenge.

As this report has shown, the program’s instructional approaches, varied but predictable activities, focus on engagement and motivation, and attention to the needs of diverse learners meet what research suggests are the essential elements of a language and word-learning program.

The Word Up Project is built upon best instructional practices as well as upon what we know about student engagement and motivation. Research suggests that use of a program like The Word Up Project will provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to meet the increasing literacy demands of the 21st century.
Works Cited


