Overview

After I developed *Daily Grammar Practice* and the *Burnette Writing Process*, one of my colleagues said, "Your next job is to solve the vocabulary problem." I knew exactly what she meant. I, like other English/language arts teachers, had tackled vocabulary a different way every year without ever finding a truly effective—and manageable—method. So, since I can't turn down a challenge, I dove into the research on teaching vocabulary and started experimenting with different approaches.

The first question I asked myself was, "What is the purpose of learning vocabulary?" And the answer is this: We learn vocabulary so that we can understand what we read and hear and so that we can communicate effectively. I realized quickly that the new SAT promotes the same purpose and therefore tests vocabulary skills in three different ways:
1. Students must figure out meanings of words in context (reading passages).
2. Students must choose the right word to go in a sentence (sentence completion).
3. Students must use words correctly (essay section).

Memorizing definitions from a list doesn't prepare students for any of these tasks. When students memorize lists of words, they remember a small percentage of the words, can use even fewer of them in context, and have no opportunity to learn word attack skills. In addition, students who come across words they haven't memorized are at a loss. Most importantly, lists are not individualized. Some advanced students may know most of the words on a given list already! When all students study the same list of words, those students who already know all of the words don't learn anything new. Finally, books that provide definitions of words right there in the margins don't help because students don't learn to figure out the definitions for themselves. The approach is entirely too passive to facilitate true learning. Research says that vocabulary instruction is more effective when students are actively engaged in the learning tasks (National Reading Panel, 2000).

With these understandings in mind, I developed the Novel Solution Vocabulary Series, a literature-based, research-based program. The program is effective and easy to use. For each novel or play, students begin with 25 vocabulary words from the literature. These words are ones that students are likely to use and to find in other contexts. Words that students will probably never hear or read again are not included unless those words are essential for understanding the text. Although the novel or play may contain many more than 25 words appropriate for study, research (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001) suggests that we should avoid teaching every unknown word in any given text. Direct vocabulary instruction, while necessary, is time consuming; and if all instruction is direct, students don't learn to figure out any meanings for themselves.

In the Novel Solution Vocabulary Series, students take a pretest on the 25 target words before they begin reading the novel or play. As they read, they look for the words they missed and record them on Word Logs. Students replace the words they got right with unfamiliar words they come across as they read, tailoring the learning to their own ability levels. Word Logs require students to learn more than just definitions but also to figure out the meanings of new words in context, to use a dictionary, and to do their reading (carefully!) so that they can find the words in the novel or play. Students must learn *about* the new words, about their structures and their various forms, which research says is essential for authentic understanding (Graves, 2000).

Students study the root words, prefixes, and suffixes of each new word because doing so helps them to figure out the meanings of new words later (Carlisle, 2004). In fact, researchers estimate that 60 percent of English words have easily identifiable roots, prefixes, and suffixes (Nagy, Anderson, Schommer, Scott, & Stallman, 1989). Reproducible root, prefix, and suffix reference charts are available beginning on page 15.

Finally, students practice using the new words through a variety of reinforcement activities (page 13), and the process ends with a posttest. Although the pretest and posttest assess students' knowledge of dictionary definitions only, the real thinking and learning take place on the Word Logs. You may also choose to assess students on their Word Logs and on their reinforcement activities. In the next section, you will see step-by-step instructions for implementing the Novel Solution Vocabulary program in your classroom.

Process

Step 1: Before students begin reading *Great Expectations*, give them the pretest, which consists of 25 vocabulary words taken from the play. Two versions of the pretest are provided in case you want to give every other student a different test. Each version includes the same vocabulary words, but the answers are in a different order. While the pretest is in matching format, there are more answer choices than vocabulary words to reduce the chance of correct answers by process of elimination. Run off one copy of the pretest for each student. Vocabulary words are listed in alphabetical order on the left side of the test, but they are not numbered. Leaving them unnumbered cuts down on confusion later when students fill in their Word Logs. The answer choices are numbered, however. In the small box next to each word, the students should write the number of the correct definition. Note that one definition may fit more than one vocabulary word; therefore, some definitions may be used more than once. For example, if definition #3 is *talkative*, then *3* may be the right answer for both *garrulous* and *loquacious*. In order to obtain the most accurate pretest results possible, discourage students from guessing.

Step 2: Grade the pretests using the answer key provided. Note that the lines on the answer key chart line up with the lines on the tests to facilitate grading. Highlight each word the student misses on the pretest. Most students will know very few of the words!

Step 3: Cut off the left side of the pretest so that you're left with only the list of vocabulary words (no answers or answer choices) and return the lists to the students. Each student now has a list of words, with the ones he doesn't know highlighted, to use as a bookmark while reading the play. To make the bookmarks sturdier, consider laminating them or running the pretests off on cardstock.

Step 4: Give each student a Word Log. Make enough copies of the Word Log so that each student has space for 25 entries—basically 13 pages per student. Logs can be copied on the front and back of the paper. If you prefer not to make copies, Word Log booklets, each with space for 100 entries (for use with four different novels and/or plays), are available from www.dgppublishing.com. Alternately, you could have students create their own logs on notebook paper.
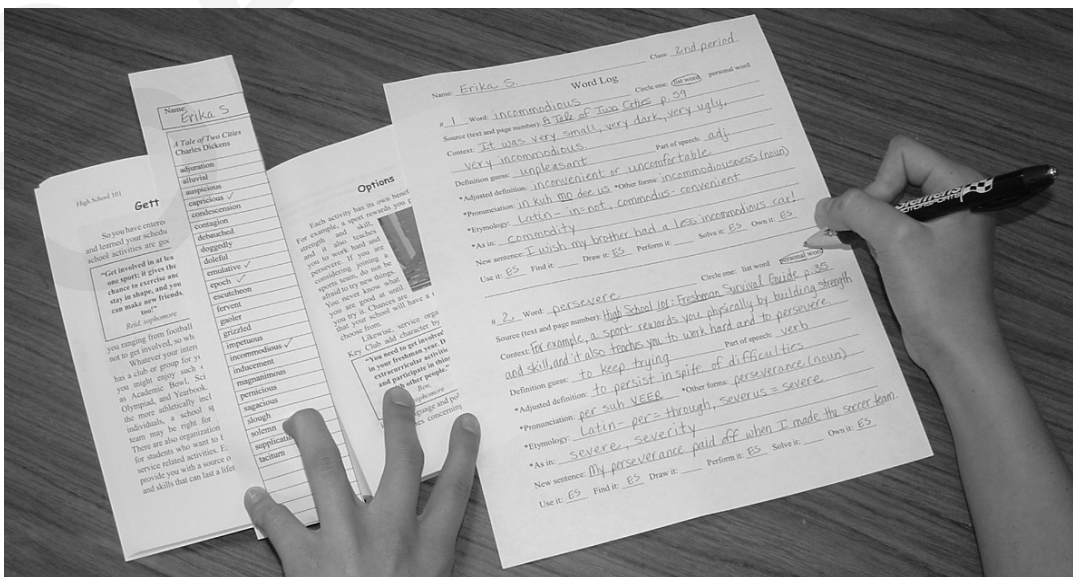
Step 5: As students read *Great Expectations* (or any other literature they happen to be reading), they will come across the words that are highlighted on their bookmarks. When they find a word, they will fill in the Word Logs. At the end of the unit, each student will have recorded 25 words on his log. If he missed only 10 words on his pretest, then he will have those 10 words plus 15 more *unfamiliar* words that he came across in his reading. If he missed 20 words on his pretest, then he'll have those 20 words plus 5 more unfamiliar words that he came across in his reading. And so forth. Students should fill in the fields on their logs as follows:

    #: These spaces should be numbered sequentially, 1-25.

    Word: Each student should fill in the words as he or she finds them in the text.

    Circle one: Each student should indicate whether this particular word is one he or she missed on the pretest or whether this word is an unfamiliar one that he or she came across in the reading.

    Source: In this space, the student should indicate where he or she found the word. Most likely students will find all of the pretest words in the literary work they are studying, but they should be allowed to find them in their personal reading as well.

    Context: The student should copy from the text the sentence in which he or she found the word.

    Definition guess: Using context clues, but without looking the word up, the student should guess at the word's definition.

    Part of speech: Based on the word's use in the sentence, the student should be able to figure out the word's part of speech.

    *Adjusted definition: At this point, the student looks up the word and writes the "real" definition and compares it to his guess. Students need not go back and change their guesses. The asterisk indicates that this step should be completed with the help of a dictionary.

    *Pronunciation: The student should write the pronunciation out phonetically instead of copying the form found in the dictionary. Again, the asterisk indicates that this step should be completed with the help of a dictionary.

    *Other forms: Here the student should note other forms of the word. For example, if the word is *candor*, the adjective form would be *candid* and the adverb form would be *candidly*. Again, the asterisk indicates that this step should be completed with the help of a dictionary.

    *Etymology: In this space, the student should write the word's origin and make note of any prefixes, suffixes, or root words that will be helpful in understanding future words. Again, the asterisk indicates that this step should be completed with the help of a dictionary.

    *As in: Here the student should list other words that share the same root(s) as the target word. Students may or may not need to utilize a dictionary to complete this step.

    New sentence: The student should then write an original sentence using the word or one of its alternate forms. Remind students that the meaning of the word should be evident in the sentence.

The last row of each log entry provides a way to track additional experience your students have with each word. As Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) prove in their research, vocabulary development is an ongoing process; in order to "own" a word, students need multiple encounters with the target word in verbal and in written contexts. You may require students to complete all six objectives, or you may allow them to select two or three per word.

Use it: Have the student initial here after he or she has used the word in a writing assignment, in a discussion, or in a vocabulary story. (See activity #2 on page 13.)
Find it: Have the student initial here after he or she has found the word in a second source.
Draw it: Have the student initial here after he or she has drawn a vocabulary picture of the word. (See activity #1 on page 13.)
Perform it: Have the student initial here after he or she has sung a song or performed a skit using the word. (See activity #3 and #4 on page 14.)
Solve it: Have the student initial here after he or she has created and/or solved a puzzle pertaining to the word. (See activity #5 on page 14.)
Own it: Have the student initial here after he or she has correctly defined the word on the posttest.

Here is a sample entry for the word *persevere*:

_2 Word: persevere   Circle one: list word   (personal word)
Source (text and page number): High School 101: Freshman Survival Guide p.35
Context: For example, a sport rewards you physically by building strength and skill, and it also teaches you to work hard and to persevere.
Definition guess: to keep trying   Part of speech: verb
*Adjusted definition: to persist in spite of difficulties
*Pronunciation: per suh VEER   *Other forms: perseverance (noun)
*Etymology: Latin- per = through, severus = severe
*As in: severe, severity
New sentence: My perseverance paid off when I made the soccer team.
Use it: ES   Find it: ES   Draw it: _____   Perform it: ES   Solve it: _____   Own it: ES

Step 6: At the end of the unit, administer the same test again as a posttest. Students' personal words need not be assessed formally. Students will benefit just from putting them on the log and using them in the reinforcement activities. In fact, if students think you will test them over their personal words, they'll be tempted to select words that they really already know. If you assure them that they won't be tested, however, they will feel more comfortable selecting difficult or unfamiliar words.

Step 7: Repeat the process with new words from another novel or play your students are reading. I recommend completing no more than four lists per year, for a maximum of 100 vocabulary words even if you read more than four major works in a year. Research suggests that students can effectively learn no more than 400 words per year (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Not all of those 400 words should come from direct instruction, however. Students will learn some words from other activities and experiences, and they will learn still more through their work with etymology.